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PENGUIN CLASSICS

HENRY JAMES

THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

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From the Pages of *The Wings of the Dove*

“Even now it’s not a question of anything I should ask you in a way to ‘do.’ It’s simply a question of your not turning me away—taking yourself out of my life. It’s simply a question of your saying: ‘Yes then, since you will, we’ll stand together. We won’t worry in advance about how or where; we’ll have a faith and find a way.’ That’s all-that would be the good you’d do me. I should have you, and it would be for my benefit.” (page 36)

“She fixed upon me herself, settled on me with her wonderful gilded claws.” (page 71)

The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognised her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. “I shall never be better than this.” (page 169)

“As I told you before, I’m American. Not that I mean that makes me worse. However, you’ll probably know what it makes me.”

(page 183)

“That’s the way people are. What they think of their enemies, goodness knows, is bad enough; but I’m still more struck with what they think of their friends.” (page 265)

“I lie well, thank God.” (page 302)

“Since she’s to die I’m to marry her?” (page 375)

Venice glowed and plashed and called and chimed again; the air was like a clap of hands, and the scattered pinks, yellows, blues, sea-greens, were like a hanging-out of vivid stuffs, a laying-down of fine carpets. (page 420)

“She won’t have loved you for nothing.” (page 445)

“I used to call her, in my stupidity—for want of anything better—a dove. Well she stretched out her wings, and it was to that they reached. They cover us.” (page 491)

THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

Henry James

With an Introduction and Notes
by Bruce L. R. Smith

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The Wings of the Dove, and Comments & Questions
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Henry James

The writer Henry James was born into a wealthy family in New York City in 1843. His father, Henry, Sr., was a religious free-thinker and follower of the philosopher Swedenborg, and associated with many of the literary men of his day, including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Young Henry was educated privately in New York, Geneva, Paris, and London; the family lived alternately in Europe and the United States for much of his childhood.

He began his literary career writing for magazines. Having dropped out of Harvard Law School to pursue writing, he associated with the literary set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was a good friend of budding novelist and critic William Dean Howells. In 1864 James's first published piece of fiction, the story "A Tragedy of Error," appeared in the *Continental Monthly*. He also wrote reviews and articles for the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Nation.* He frequently traveled to Europe and in 1876 settled permanently in London.

James is often cited as one of literature's great stylists; it has been said that his writing surrounds a subject and illuminates it with a flickering light, rather than pinning it down; according to Virginia Woolf in her diaries, he spoke in the same way. His style became more and more indirect as he moved from his early period, when he produced novels that considered the differences between American and European culture and character—*Roderick Hudson* (1876), The *American* (1877), *The Europeans* (1878), *Daisy Miller* (1879), *Washington Square* (1881), and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)—to his middle period, when he wrote two novels about social reformers and revolutionaries, *The Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima,* both in 1886, as well as the novellas The *Aspern Papers* (1888) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

In 1898 James retreated to Lamb House, a mansion he had purchased in Rye, England. There he produced the great works of his final period, in which in complex prose he subtly portrayed his characters' inner lives: The *Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). He returned to the United States for the last time to supervise production of a twenty-six-volume edition of his most important fictional works that was published between 1907 and 1917. *The American Scene* (1907), an account of his last journey to America, is highly critical of his native land. He became a British citizen in 1915. Shortly after receiving the Order of Merit, Henry James died, on February 28, 1916, leaving behind a prodigious body of work: twenty completed novels, 112 stories, and twelve plays, as well as voluminous travel writing and literary journalism and criticism.

The World of Henry James and *The Wings of the Dove*

1789 William James, Henry's grandfather, emigrates to the United States from Ireland.

1811 Henry James, Sr., the author's father, is born.

1826 Washington Square is dedicated as a public place and military parade ground. Originally a marsh, then a graveyard, it served as a spot for duels and executions prior to this transformation.

1828 Construction begins on the first house on the north side of Washington Square; over the next thirty years Washington Square North will become the most expensive and fashionable street bordering Washington Square.

1832 William James dies, leaving a $3 million estate to his twelve children.

1835 Henry James's maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Walsh, moves into a townhouse at 18 Washington Square North (now part of 2 Fifth Avenue), occupying it until 1847. James visits her often as an infant and toddler.

1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson publishes his essay "Nature," setting forth the main principles of Transcendentalism.

1837 William Dean Howells is born; he will be James's colleague, an important editor, and a founder of American "realism."

1840 Henry James, Sr., marries Mary Robertson Walsh of New York City.

1842 William, the eldest child of Henry, Sr., and Mary James, is born.

1843 On April 15, Henry James, Jr., is born at 21 Washington Place, in New York City, around the corner from his grandmother. In October the James family relocates to Europe.

1844 The family returns to New York City.

1845 Henry's brother Garth Wilkinson ("Wilky") James is born.

1846 Another brother, Robertson ("Bob") James, is born.

1848 Alice James is born.

1849 The social circle Henry, Sr., inhabits comprises philosophers and writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Henry, Jr., is educated privately in the United States and Europe. His exposure to the Old World during his formative years establishes in him a lifelong preference for Europe over America.

1853 The New York City Commission pays $5,000,000 for land that will become Central Park, a vast public recreation space in the European style. The first portion of the park will open in 1858; it will be complete some sixteen years hence.

1857 The *Atlantic Monthly* is founded by Moses Dresser Phillips and Francis H. Underwood. Early contributors include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell (the magazine's first editor), and Oliver Wendell Holmes. In coming years Henry James, Jr., will be a frequent contributor.

1859 In October Henry, Sr., takes his family to Geneva.

1860 The family returns to America in September and settles in Newport, Rhode Island.

1861 The American Civil War begins.

1862 Henry James, Jr., enrolls at Harvard Law School but drops out after a year to pursue a writing career. He becomes friendly with writer William Dean Howells.

1864 In February James publishes his first piece of fiction, the story "A Tragedy of Error," in the *Continental* Monthly. Nathaniel Hawthorne dies.

1865 James begins to write reviews for the Nation, a new liberal weekly. The American Civil War ends.

1866 The first permanent transatlantic telegraph cable links Europe and America, vastly increasing the speed of information transmittal.

1869 In England James meets George Eliot and writes reviews of her works, including *Romola, Middlemarch,* and *Daniel Deronda,* which are published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and

the Galaxy, a literary journal. Mark Twain publishes the best-selling travel book The Innocents Abroad, based on letters he had written while journeying by steamship to Europe and the Holy Land; it treats hallowed Old World landmarks with irreverence and parodies the manners and mores of Europeans and Americans.

1870 James's cousin Mary ("Minny") Temple dies in March, and the author, devastated, moves back to New York. His social opportunities are abundant; he spends time at Emerson's house in Concord, Massachusetts, and meets Henry Adams, who has just been appointed editor of the North *American Review.* The Metropolitan Museum of Art opens in New York City.

1871 James publishes his first novel, *Watch and Ward,* in installments in the *Atlantic;* it introduces what will be a prominent Jamesian theme: the development of a young girl into womanhood.

1872 Assigned to write a travel series for the Nation, James sails to Liverpool and spends time in Europe. Susan B. Anthony casts a vote in the presidential election in Rochester, New York, and is arrested.

1873 Financial panic grips New York with the failure of Jay Cooke and Company, the nation's preeminent investment bank. After a ten-year economic boom, the United States enters its worst depression to date, although New York continues its prodigious growth.

1875 James publishes in the *Atlantic Monthly* the novel *Roderick Hudson,* about an American sculptor in Rome and his struggle to reconcile art and passion. During his early period (also called his international period), he compares the people and cultures of the United States and Europe, focusing especially on the differences. While living in Paris, James associates with the writers Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola, as well as Russian expatriate authors, including the novelist Ivan Turgenev. He works on his novel *The American,* about a self-made American millionaire who tries to marry the daughter of French aristocrats.

1876 *Roderick Hudson* is published in book form. Impatient with

1877 *The American* is published in book form. James is friendly with Alfred Tennyson, William Gladstone, and Robert Browning. While in Rome, James hears about an American "child of nature and of freedom" who consorted with a "good-looking Roman, of vague identity." James is immediately inspired to turn this story into a novel, *Daisy Miller.*

1878 James publishes the short novel *The Europeans.* The Macmillan Publishing Company of London asks him to write a biography of either Washington Irving or Nathaniel Hawthorne.

1879 James publishes *Daisy Miller,* about a young American woman in Rome, in book form. He signs a contract for the British copyright on *Hawthorne,* which is published in the English Men of Letters series in London.

1880-1881 The focus of James's writing shifts to social and psychological drama. Washington *Square* is serialized in *Cornhill Magazine* and *Harper's* (1880) and released in book form (1881); the novel concerns a young American woman whose father rejects the man she wants to marry. *The Portrait of a Lady* is serialized in *Macmillan's Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly* (1880-1881), and in book form (1881); this brilliant novel depicts a young American woman who out of a kind of generosity marries the wrong man. James vows "never again to return" to New York, in a fit of disdain over the way the city's "oppressive" economic growth has lowered the quality of life.

1882 James travels to Washington, D.C., where he briefly meets Oscar Wilde.

1886 James publishes the first novels of his middle period: *The Bostonians,* the story of a struggle between a southern conservative and an embittered suffragist, and *The Princess Casamassima,* an exploration of the personal dangers involved in taking up anarchism and revolution.

1888 James publishes the short novel The *Aspern* Papers, about a man who woos the custodian of letters by a poet he idolizes.

1889 Psychologically and financially depressed by the failure of *The Bostonians,* James shifts his focus to playwriting for the next six years.

Casamassima, an exploration of the personal dangers involved in taking anarchism and revolution.

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1890 He publishes *The Tragic Muse,* about art and theater in London and Paris. His brother William publishes his groundbreaking and influential *Principles of Psychology,* in which pragmatism and "radical empiricism" are key elements.

1891 James's dramatization of *The American* fares moderately well.

1892 After a life beset by illness, Alice James dies in England, with Henry at her side.

1895 James's first dramatic work written as such, *Guy Domville,* is booed by the opening-night audience and receives mostly negative reviews, though George Bernard Shaw praises it. After little success with playwriting, James returns to writing fiction. The United States increases its involvement in a conflict between Spain and Cuba, which wants independence from Spanish rule. James opposes this involvement, calling it "none of our business."

1897 He publishes *What Maisie Knew,* the story of a preadolescent girl who must chose between her parents and a governess.

1898 James publishes the ghost story *The Turn of the Screw.* He purchases Lamb House, in Rye, England, where he will write his last novels and letters. The Spanish-American War takes place.

1900 During the final stage of his writing career, James's style becomes increasingly complex and convoluted. Over the next few years, he produces what are often considered his greatest works.

1902 He publishes *The Wings of the Dove,* about a group of people who scheme to inherit a dying woman's fortune.

1903 *The Ambassadors,* about an American suspicious of European

ways who is won over by life in Paris, is published, as is "The Beast in the Jungle," a story of a man who believes he is intended for something remarkable. In London, James meets Edith Wharton.

1904 His novel of adultery *The Golden Bowl* is published. He travels to the United States to oversee the production of a revised collection of his most important works of fiction.

1907 James publishes *The American Scene,* his observations on what America has become. Publication of the twenty-six volumes of the revised fiction collection, *The Novels and Tales of Henry James,* begins; it will continue until 1917.

1908 James publishes the story "The Jolly Corner," an oblique commentary on the America he has left behind.

1910 In January James becomes very ill. He is nursed by his brother William and William's wife, Alice, and the three return to North America. William, also ill, dies shortly thereafter. James visits New York, where he receives psychiatric care.

1911 In August he returns to England.

1914 James begins work on two novels, *The Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past,* which he will not complete before his death.

1915 James's health deteriorates. He becomes a British subject.

1916 On New Year's Day he receives the Order of Merit. On February 28 Henry James dies. His ashes are taken to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to be buried in American soil, near his brother William.

1917 *Ivory Tower* and *The Sense of the Past* are published in their unfinished state.

Introduction

The *Wings of the Dove,* published in 1902 in New York and London, ranks as one of the three masterpieces of Henry James's "major period"[1] (along with *The Ambassadors* [1903] and *The Golden Bowl* [1904]). Of all of Henry James's prodigious literary output—he wrote twenty-two novels (two unfinished); 112 shorter tales or stories; autobiographical works; twelve plays; a vast array of travel essays; scores of critical essays, commentaries, and reviews of all kinds; and an astonishing number of letters to family and friends—the three late novels seem to have won the most enduring critical acclaim. They were written, roughly one a year, in a burst of creative energy from 1901 to 1904 as James approached his sixtieth birthday. The original idea for Wings was formed about 1894 when James wrote in his notebooks, at the top of a list of a dozen potential stories: *"La Mourante:* the girl who is dying, the young man, and the girl he is engaged to." The popular appeal of the three late novels has never quite matched their critical plaudits. For some, the reason is that the three works are not as accessible as much of James's other work. The novels are stylistically complex, written in an allusive and poetic prose, and they depart from the "realism" of such earlier works as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The American* (1877), *The Bostonians* (1886), and *Washington Square* (1881), and from the allegorical structure of *Roderick Hudson* (1875-1876).

While the reader cruises along smoothly in the realistic works, easily engrossed in the narrative as the action unfolds in a leisurely fashion, to be caught up in the "action" of the late novels is a different experience. Much more effort and close attention is demanded of the reader. The main action, indeed, is often in the minds of the characters, in their nuances of consciousness, and in the interplay of their moral sentiments. The individuals furthermore act within a framework of complex social forces and circumstances. The moral sensibilities of the characters precipitate agonizing choices for them, and yet the social context constrains the choices. The modern reader, on tackling Wings or one of the other major novels, may be inclined to echo the exasperated sentiments that William James once addressed to his brother apropos the late prose style:

> You can't skip a word if you are to get the effect, and 19 out of 20 worthy readers grow intolerant. 'Say it out, for God's sake,' they cry, 'and have done with it.'... For gleams and innuendos and felicitous verbal insinuations you are unapproachable, but the core of literature is solid. Give it to us once again.[2]

Some friends have expressed to me the fear that the language of the late James works is so far removed from modern usage that the novels may come to be regarded as in a category with, say, a Shake-spearean comedy whose allusions are hopelessly beyond the ken of today's readers. I believe that this view is mistaken. In rereading Wings in preparing this essay I was struck once again by the novel's richness and vitality, the humanness of the characters, and the moral relevance of their struggles. The rewards are great for the reader who perseveres. Once you are caught up in the story, you will be swept along and you will very likely join the ranks of the James enthusiasts.

William James, in the same letter in which he complained to his brother about the dense prose in the late novels, referred to Henry's 1907 travel book, *The American Scene,* as "in its peculiar way ... *supremely* great." To struggle with the moral dilemmas of the characters in the late James novels is to be transformed along with them, to experience the ambiguities and complexities that are very much a part of our modern lives. William James was right—there is something supremely great in his brother's work. Whether one reads Henry James's late novels primarily for aesthetic reasons, for social awareness, or to explore the clash of European and American sensibilities, the effort will be repaid manyfold. The richness, subtlety, and depth of characterization, the relevance of the moral issues, and the unforgettable portrayal of human dilemmas secure a place for James's late novels among the treasures of world literature.

Fans of Henry James have long debated the respective virtues of the three major novels. *The Wings of the* Dove has risen in critical esteem in recent years, though it still has detractors among the critics. A familiar complaint is that *Wings* lacks the symmetry that James achieved in *The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl.* Some have found the ending unconvincing. James himself feared that the early sections in *Wings* might be too drawn out and that other sections may have thus become too crowded. At the time he completed *The Ambassadors,* James was convinced that it was his greatest achievement. James ultimately considered *The Golden Bowl* his best work but ranked *Wings* as one of his "advanced" works. The arguments over which of the late novels is the most accessible, or has the most followers among the *cognoscenti* or the general public, or best represents the true genius of Henry James are lively and diverting. But much of this disputation, I think, misses the mark. The three major novels can be better understood and more deeply appreciated in reference to each other. Each deserves a wider readership; each has been to some degree a neglected classic. There are,

however, favorable signs. There has been a steady growth in the number of James devotees in recent years, if one can judge by the number of Web sites and "hits" on them, the college courses featuring James, the number of journal articles, and the like. In publishing *The Wings of the Dove* in this Barnes & Noble Classics edition, our intent is not only to bring this classic to a broad audience but to increase the readership for and interest in all of the James works.

A few words are in order about the circumstances of the publication of *The Wings of the Dove.* James was in the habit of working on more than one project at a time, and he had originally contracted to finish Wings by September 1, 1901. *The Ambassadors* was to be prepared for serialization in the *North American Review* but was not finished until the summer of 1901, and only then could James concentrate his energies fully on Wings. He had determined that *Wings* should not be bound by the formalities and rules of serial publication in a magazine, which usually dictated twelve installments of roughly equal length. He was committed therefore to submit a complete manuscript of *Wings* to Constable in England and Scribner's in America. Seeing that the initial deadline for Wings would be impossible to meet, he asked for an extension to August 1902, with publication to be deferred to the fall of 1902. The proposal was unacceptable to his publishers, who argued that their fall schedule was already too crowded and that James's usual readers would want to read the book on their summer holidays. A compromise was worked out: The manuscript would be submitted in April 1902 with publication a few months later in June. James worked furiously in late 1901 and submitted a large installment of the manuscript of *Wings* to the publishers in December. But in January 1902 he became ill and his production slowed. (As with *The Ambassadors* and subsequently with *The Golden Bowl,* he dictated *Wings* to his typist Mary Weld.) Despite his best efforts, he could not meet the April deadline. He did dispatch some 400 pages of typescript, however, and promised his publishers the finished manuscript by May 15. He estimated that it would take an additional 100 pages to finish the novel. Winding up the story actually required more than twice that number of pages. He sent in the final 220 pages on May 20, 1902.

Delays in typesetting, the pressures of correcting proofs, the vagaries of transatlantic mail, and the task of trying to coordinate the dates of publication in New York and London, as well as continuing problems with *The Ambassadors,* brought further delays. *The Wings of the Dove* finally appeared on August 20, 1902 (ahead, as it turned out, of *The Ambassadors,* which was serialized in the *North American Review* from January to December 1903). The print run for *Wings was* 3,000 copies in America and 4,000 in England. Initial sales of *Wings* were disappointing. In addition, there were numerous typos, misspellings, misprints, and other errors in both editions. Worse yet, differences appeared between the British and American editions, evidence that James corrected the respective proofs at different times and did not correlate the versions sent to the different publishers.

The errors were largely corrected in the New York Edition, the series in which James painstakingly revised and reissued an authoritative text for a large part of his entire literary output. James finished his revisions of *Wings* in 1909; it was the eleventh novel issued in the New York Edition. It is a tribute to his artistic conscience that he persevered, for by the time he set to work on *Wings* it was clear that sales of the whole New York series were well below what he had hoped for. He could expect no profits on *Wings,* and the publisher reduced the print run to only 1,000 copies. Unknown to James, his friend Edith Wharton colluded with his publisher to subsidize in part the New York Edition and make it possible for the series to appear.

James made no substantive textual changes in the New York *Edition of Wings* comparable, for example, to what he did with *The Portrait of a Lady,* in which he made significant alterations, including most notably changes in the novel's ending, or with some of the other works that he drastically revised. In *Wings,* in addition to correcting mistakes, he sharpened the language of the text, by substituting more active and concrete images, and made his symbols more truly poetic.

This Barnes & Noble Classics edition is based on the 1909 New York Edition and incorporates a small number of additional editorial changes made by subsequent scholars. The aim is to present a text that is authoritative without burdening the general reader with an elaborate scholarly apparatus. Brief explanatory notes appear at the bottom of the page where necessary for clarity, and endnotes and a list of suggested references for further study are also included. But, as with all great works of literature, the reader will gain his or her greatest satisfaction by engaging the text directly, without being constrained by a critic's interpretative framework.

As with much else in the Jamesian oeuvre, however, we can gain important clues to *The Wings of the Dove* by noting James's own views on what he was trying to accomplish. James was an astute critic of his own work, and in his preface to the New York Edition (included in this edition), he gives us an illuminating statement of his aims. "The idea [of *Wings],"* he says, "reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamored of the world ... and passionately desiring to 'put in' before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived" (p. 3). The story, however, was not to be "the record predominantly of a collapse" (p. 5). Quite the contrary, James

intended that his victim be seen as "contesting every inch of the road, as catching at every object the grasp of which might make for delay" (p. 5). She expresses in her fight the nobility of the human spirit. The novel therefore consists in working out an elaboration of the nuances and the twists and turns along the path, and the memorable human encounters that occur in a noble, but untimely, doomed struggle against her fate. The struggles of James's heroine are nothing but the "soul of drama—which is the portrayal, as we know, of a catastrophe determined in spite of oppositions" (p. 5).

James's heroine is Milly Theale, a twenty-four-year-old New Yorker who embodies all the finest virtues of the American woman: freshness, spontaneity, innocence, a thirst for life. Milly is fabulously wealthy and is the sole survivor of a large upper-class New York family. The rest of family died off in the period since her tenth birthday. We learn that they died from "different causes," lest we infer that Milly is the victim of some strange hereditary illness. Milly's illness is never specified, except that we learn in book sixth that it is "not lungs," when Kate Croy and Merton Densher, the other two protagonists of the novel, are discussing Milly's health (p. 260).

James's beloved cousin, Mary ("Minny") Temple, who did die of tuberculosis some twenty years before, was the model for Milly, as she was for Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady* and Maggie Verver of *The Golden Bowl.* Milly Theale is a more fully realized creation than Isabel Archer and probably outshines Maggie Verver as well. Milly dominates the events of Wings even when she is not physically present. Milly is "there" when she is not there, whereas Maggie Verver, a more passive figure, does not always seem to be there when she is there. Milly's disease in Wings, though certainly real since it will ultimately claim her life, has almost a spiritual quality. Milly's will to live can keep the disease at bay, for a time at least, and the loss of her will to live can cause its progress to accelerate.

Milly's initial consultation with the famous London physician Sir Luke Strett in book fifth is surely the most unphysical of all medical examinations in literature. It consists mainly of the two of them conversing amiably for a time. Gently interjecting a question now and then, the benignant Sir Luke encourages Milly to talk about herself, her family, and her hopes. Presumably from this he gleans a kind of medical history, but James gives no clear indication of the fact and does not dwell on this kind of realistic detail. Sir Luke is in every respect unlike another famous physician of nineteenth-century English literature, the young Dr. Lydgate of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-1872). While Lydgate is ardent, impetuous, and scientifically inclined, the avuncular Sir Luke is worldly, urbane, and, in modern jargon, laid back. He is so confident of his skills that he scarcely bothers with pills, powders, and the usual armamentaria of medical practice. Sir Luke, through a process of divination or intuition, does, however, diagnose Milly's condition precisely. He understands what is required. He is enamored (in a fatherly way) with Milly; her kindness, courage, and nobility of spirit make her irresistible to him. He promises to help her, and he gives the message that she wants to hear: She must live to the fullest, and not be bound or limited in any way by her condition.

It is part of the novel's design that we know more of Milly's state of mind than of her physical appearance. But we do have clues to her appearance. Milly apparently is not beautiful. Her nose and mouth are too big, and her pale skin makes her appear almost white, which in turn accentuates the redness of her hair. She generally wears black clothes that give her a slightly eccentric appearance. When we last see her at the rented *palazzo* in Venice, she is wearing a dazzling white gown and white pearls. This contrasts strikingly with her past costume and makes her inner beauty come radiantly to life. What counts is her inner beauty, her qualities of goodness and kindness that endear her to others. Of course her enormous wealth is part of her aura. Milly herself is completely unselfconscious about her wealth. She no more thinks of money than of the air she breathes. She will simply spend what she has to even if she is occasionally taken to the cleaners by those who serve her.

Henry James clearly worshiped Milly as much as he did his dead cousin Minny Temple. The memory of his cousin never left James. To Susan Shepherd Stringham, the Boston writer and Milly's traveling companion in the novel, Milly seems almost "a princess" or "an heir of all the ages." This latter characterization is how James wishes us to see Milly (see the preface, p. 6), and the phrase is a useful shorthand for everything she represents.

To some observers, Milly is so unreal in her goodness as to belong in a fairy tale. There are certainly fairy-tale qualities to The Wings of *the* Dove: The good princess encounters evil forces and a kind of magical tale unfolds. Indeed, Milly herself feels as if she were "on a carpet" as she whirls through the hubbub and bustle of London life. James's less-noble female characters may appear more "real" to some readers. Certainly, Kate Croy is a memorable literary creation of this type. Other critics, some of a feminist bent, counter that Milly is a much more forceful figure than merely the long-suffering victim. In their view Milly is by no means a mere patsy; rather, she is someone who flexes her muscles in a quiet way and who makes full use of all the power that her great wealth confers.

The other major characters, whose relations with Milly form the heart of the novel, are two very different people. Kate Croy and Merton Densher have little in common beyond their mutual sexual attraction and their

poverty. Kate is pure action, a handsome, strong, willful, dark-haired young woman who knows her mind exactly. Kate has a talent for living and habitually devises practical plans of action to cope with any problems she encounters. James had sketched Kate in his notebook as a willful, unsympathetic figure. But she turns out to be more fully rounded, a complex and compelling figure with a mixture of attractive and unattractive qualities. Whatever James's original intentions, Kate Croy becomes through his artistry a sympathetic character even though she is the instigator of an unsavory, not to say immoral scheme to exploit her sick friend. She is also the one figure in the book who is brutally honest. She is in a tough game, and it is hardly surprising that she plays to win. Self-deception is not something she can afford.

Densher, in contrast, is pure thought, a man who delights in his own cerebrations. He is happiest when he is thinking and pondering about events, examining other people's motives (or his own), or when he is studying historical events or uncovering a scandal to put in his newspaper. He is passive where Kate is active. He is a loner, while she recognizes (if she does not always like) the necessity and inevitability of seeking one's goals by manipulating others in a web of social interactions. Their opposite personalities and qualities of mind attract and apparently are complementary, even though we may well wonder how long such an attachment will last. If they were forced to survive on Densher's meager pay as a journalist, their relationship would probably soon fizzle out. Densher has a conviction deep down that "he will never be rich." Unless pushed by Kate, he would be content to drift through life reading, writing the occasional piece for his newspaper, and contemplating the state of affairs from the margins of society. He is not wholly without ambition. He does want to get ahead in his chosen profession of journalism, as is evidenced by his willingness to visit America (where he first makes the acquaintance of Milly). But he doesn't have the relentless drive to advance his career with real vigor, just as he doesn't have the will to resist Kate when she propels him into the scheme to entrap Milly. Kate is willing to roll the dice, whereas Densher on his own could hardly imagine doing so. He admires her precisely for her uncanny knack of knowing what she wants and for her boldness in trying to achieve her goals. How, why, and to what degree he modifies his feelings toward Kate are critical turning points in the novel.

Rounding out the cast of characters is a host of lesser figures who play their parts in the drama. They are background figures, providing a kind of color, tint, scenery, and atmosphere. I use visual images advisedly, for James's text is like a canvas on which he has painted an intricate scene. The eye is drawn to the characters in the foreground, but the others are necessary for the complete portrait. James's metaphors and allusions are predominantly visual. His bent, his artistic taste is to painting, in contrast to that of Proust or Mann, whose novels are filled with musical references and allusions. That the visual arts seize the imaginations of James's characters further reinforces the whole effect of portraiture.

Kate's aunt, Maud Lowder, is the rich, iron-willed, and domineering matriarch with whom Kate lives. Aunt Maud is determined to use her niece to advance her own ends. Maud Lowder acquired her money through marriage, and she lacks the aristocratic pedigree that is necessary to function at the top of London's disintegrating, but still snobbish, social order. As a social climber and would-be aristocrat, Maud seeks to use her beautiful niece to advance her own social standing by marrying Kate off to a member of the nobility. The immediate candidate for this end is Lord Mark, who has a beautiful estate but is otherwise essentially broke. He needs money to keep up his lifestyle and is unabashedly in the hunt for a bride so that he can barter his social position for a fortune. He is none too finicky, requiring only that the woman's fortune be large enough. Lord Mark, a somewhat shadowy figure, turns out to be the closest thing to a purely evil force in the novel. His visit to Milly in Venice, in which he reveals to her the true state of the relationship between Kate and Densher, is as an act of malevolence and vengeance.

Aunt Maud's social control extends also to Kate's unfortunate and widowed sister Marian, who lives in lower-class penury with three children to care for. Marian has fallen out of favor with Aunt Maud because she married a man of whom Aunt Maud disapproved, and is now, after her husband's early death, reduced to living in conditions close to squalor. Her only hope in the short run is for occasional acts of minor benevolence from her aunt. Both Marian and Lionel Croy, Kate and Marian's disgraced father, harbor the idea that Kate one day will be able to care for them handsomely if she only submits entirely to Aunt Maud's wishes. Lionel Croy has besmirched the family through unspecified criminal acts; he has been ostracized by Aunt Maud but from time to time extracts small sums of money from her.

Though Milly is the center of the novel's action, she is not present in the first two books, and after one brief episode in book eighth, she disappears in the last two books of the novel. The novel's first two books are given over entirely to Kate, to her relationship with Densher and to her family background. The initial chapters set the stage for Milly's arrival in London and her debut in the London social scene. James had his doubts about this device of leaving Milly to a later appearance, fearing that he may be too long-winded in setting the stage. The novel then could end up having "too big a head for its body."[3] He feared that, by having to cram too much into the middle sections, he might cause sudden shifts of focus and make the narrative hard for the reader to follow. While Wings does lack the structural symmetry of *The Ambassadors* and The *Golden Bowl*, the technique of deferring Milly's appearance heightens the drama and brilliantly succeeds in the final analysis.

Milly arrives on the scene in book third, and we learn all that we need to know of her New York background and her family circumstances. In demonstrating the force of her character by showing how she affects the others, James dramatizes her the more, just as he does with the figure of Mrs. Newsome in *The Ambassadors* (who never actually appears in the novel). Milly's presence is powerfully felt even in her absence. She animates the other characters; they are at first preoccupied with trying to figure her out and then they scheme to use her for their own purposes. Her seeming victimhood is demonstrated by the way the others constantly plot behind her back. The tawdriness of their intrigues contrasts with Milly's own lonely struggle to live.

Milly's character is initially presented through the eyes of Susan Stringham, who is accompanying her to Europe. Susan's role in *Wings* is similar to that of Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors* or to Colonel Bob Assingham's role in the narrative structure of *The Golden Bowl.* James refers to this literary device as the *ficelle* (literally, a little piece of string), by which he means the use of a lesser character to facilitate the flow of events and to link the major scenes.[4] One day in Switzerland, while looking for Milly, Susan Stringham sees the book Milly was reading left by the side of the trail and follows the path that leads to the edge of a precipice. She sees Milly sitting in a precarious position on a rock slab, gazing down at the valley stretched out below her. For a moment Susan is frightened, thinking that her friend might be contemplating suicide. She is afraid to call out for fear that a sudden disturbance might startle Milly and send her over the edge. Then, as Susan contemplates her friend, she slowly realizes that as Milly "was looking down at the kingdoms of the earth ... it wouldn't be with a view of renouncing them. Was she choosing among them or did she want them all?" (p. 106). She understands that her friend is not running from life but hungers for life. Shortly, Milly announces to her friend that she wants to go directly to London. She has evidently had enough of Switzerland's bucolic charms, and wants to be at the center of activity in the world's most bustling metropolis.

Susan Stringham happens to have an old friend in London from the days before the marriage to her late husband. This friend of her youth, now also widowed, is Maud Manningham Lowder, who is Kate Croy's aunt. Susan writes to her friend Maud, and upon their arrival in London renews the friendship. Milly, with her "heir of all the ages" qualities, quickly captivates Maud, and is introduced into Maud's London circle. Milly's wealth, though she carries it gracefully, inevitably attracts attention. In the London scene of the day, wealth makes one "a great personage." Maud and her friends treat Milly as such, although they also regard her as eccentric. Milly is sensitive enough to see that she is being patronized, and wishes she could escape from the stereotype. She especially wants to be respected by her new friend Kate and by Merton Densher (whom she had met in New York when he visited the city as a journalist). Milly sees that the Londoners she meets seem preoccupied with money, but she does not yet understand the deeper currents and plots being hatched around her. For the moment she is happy to be caught up in the excitement of London, in broadening her knowledge of the world (and her knowledge of herself). She is living more fully through her new friends.

Milly is a symbol of the innocent but thoughtful American guided by an innate idealism and an intuitive sense of what is right. Milly, like her country, is without a significant past to shape her identity, and is also without culture but is hungry to learn. In Kate, equally a creature of her circumstances, opposing qualities are represented: She is shrewd, knowing, a survivor by temperament and by necessity. She is driven by values forged within a framework of practical reality. Her values are purely exigent, and she is on the make because she has no other choice. In the general condition of *fin-de-siècle* England, Kate suffers both from too much history and from a radical uncertainty about the future. Kate's family fortunes are on the wane (as England's commercial fortunes, too, are under siege). Kate, living by her wits like other Londoners, faces a crumbling social order, still beset with vestiges of privilege, and a crass, cash-driven morality where money and competition reign. Although *Wings* is framed almost in mythic terms—the fair princess versus the Dark Lady, innocence against guile, America's innate goodness against England's expediential morality—James's genius lies in his making the characters alive and concrete, palpably real as they interact and make their ways within the London scene, and never mere caricatures.

Milly is caught up almost immediately in a plan of Aunt Maud's to detach Kate once and for all from the impoverished Densher. Maud finds out that Milly has met Densher in New York and quickly decides to try to link Milly with Densher—to her it is self-evident that any sensible man would be attracted to a woman of Milly's wealth, along with the added bonus of Milly's apparent pliability. Once attached to Milly, Densher would be moved to the periphery and Maud would be free to advance her plan to marry Kate to Lord Mark. As subterfuge, Maud advances the notion that Merton Densher is a "family friend." Kate, who is in love with Densher, at first resents this move by her aunt, but soon enough realizes its potential uses for her own purposes. Gradually, with the twists and turns of real life, Kate's own plot takes shape as a way to thwart her aunt. She will outsmart her aunt by adopting her aunt's very plan.

Kate's plan begins to take shape when she discovers that Milly may be seriously ill. The idea is that Kate will encourage Densher to be nice to Milly—she senses at once that Milly is attracted to him—and she will thus persuade Milly that there is nothing between Densher and herself. Milly will in due course fall in love with Densher, Kate believes, and want to marry him, which will result in Densher inheriting her fortune. By

exploiting the dying girl's desperate wish to find love, Kate will escape her aunt's and Lord Mark's clutches. She will have it all: the man she loves as her husband, Milly's money, and her own freedom of action. Kate's approach to life is epitomized by her comment to Densher in book second that "I *shan't* sacrifice you. Don't cry out till you're hurt. I shall sacrifice nobody and nothing, and that's just my situation, that I want and that I shall try for everything. That ... is how I see myself" (p. 70).

The burden of actually implementing the scheme, however, falls on Merton Densher. Once having set things in motion, Kate steps into the background, and it will be Densher's job to deceive Milly, to become her lover and/or husband, and thus to inherit her money. His emotions, and his awakening moral sensibilities as he proceeds, and the impact of all this on his relations with Kate provide the main dramatic tension for the novel. Densher, who becomes something of an exemplar for the anti-hero figure so prominent in twentieth-century fiction, is passive, a spectator type of person, someone to whom things happen. His moral struggles grow out of his reaction to the circumstances he finds himself in—his dilemma has come about, seemingly, only because he wanted to be kind. He is meant, as Henry James originally envisaged the character's development, to undergo a spiritual transformation as he comes to see the horror of his role in exploiting the dying girl's quest to hang on to life. Whether the reader will be convinced that Densher's conversion is genuine remains an open question. James, in the actual writing of the novel as opposed to his notebook projections, made Densher's spiritual development a more nuanced affair, and left us to judge Densher's motives. Is Densher's ostensible renunciation of Milly's fortune merely a self-righteous gesture, an effort to conceal the extent of his own moral responsibility? Some readers may find Densher's late actions priggish and bizarre—far removed, indeed, from any true signs of respect for Milly's memory.

Kate stays in character to the end. She is not squeamish; she is resolute and matter-of-fact. She holds to her rationale that the deception brought Milly a degree of solace in her fight for life. After all, Kate remarks on an earlier occasion, "Who does Milly have but us?" Kate wonders, in the final scene with Densher after Milly has died and after Densher has received notice from Milly's New York attorneys of the bequest of her fortune, why he hadn't simply denied to Milly the truth of Lord Mark's vengeful revelation. Susan Stringham at the time had also urged Densher to deny Lord Mark's accusation, which had devastated Milly and caused her to "turn her face to the wall." Densher is shocked by the suggestion. This is the one thing he could not do. He could only seek Milly's forgiveness in his final interview with her. Kate presses him to tell her what actually happened—did Milly, in fact, forgive him? Densher is vague—all he can recall is that the encounter lasted about twenty minutes and ended when she grew tired and asked him to leave her. Densher assumes that he was forgiven, but he assumed all along that his moral responsibility was mitigated by the fact that his role was passive and because he was motivated by kindliness. He has, in fact, deceived himself repeatedly. The meeting with Sir Luke Strett in Venice, for example, shows Densher at his self-righteous worst. Sir Luke tells him that Milly would like to see him, and Densher grandly imagines that Sir Luke thinks highly of him and sees him as someone seeking only to comfort Milly. This manifest self-deception makes us wonder about Densher's state of mind.

Densher presents Kate with a choice between having Milly's money without him or him without the money. But she cannot have both. Kate has failed the tests that Densher has devised for her, and apparently she now finds herself back where she started: having to choose between love and money. But will Densher be able to carry out his grand gesture? Will he be able to resist Kate's stronger will and her greater capacity for life? Densher is the quintessential loser thrust into circumstances he does not fully understand. James still has sympathy for Densher even if this troubled soul's spiritual transformation falls short. Densher, in his moral confusions and hesitations, is truer to life and more credible without the full moral awakening. Though polarities of good and evil are often implied in the novel, James endows his characters with a mixture of motives and with nuanced qualities that prevent us from making easy moral judgments. James's characters are vividly alive, struggling in their imperfect ways to realize their destinies in a world that lacks moral clarity. For James, there is a sense of foreboding in the air. The cash nexus is the spirit of the new post-Victorian age. Everywhere in *The Wings of the Dove,* from the thrusting commercialism of London to the dilapidation and fading glory of Venice, there is the sense that the old order is passing and the higher values of Western civilization are under assault.

Kate, with her quick perception, recognizes in the novel's final scene that something fundamental has happened. Densher has changed; he is no longer a reliable ally. She believes that Densher has fallen in love with a ghost; he has become enamored of Milly's memory. Just when Kate's scheme has apparently brilliantly succeeded, the whole effort has in fact fallen apart. Densher's equivocal attempt to absolve himself from blame and his quixotic attitude toward Milly's money have doomed Kate's best-laid plans. Densher assures her that he is still ready to marry her "in an hour." Kate asks, "As we were?" The "as we were" means what exactly—as they were in the old days before Milly came on the scene? As they were before Densher's renounces Milly's money? "As we were," he replies. Kate, ever clear-headed and decisive, gives a firm shake of the head and turns to the door, declaring, "We shall never be again as we were!" (p. 492).

There are in Wings few of the "big scenes" that one finds in many nineteenth-century novels. James's

method of indirection means that we as readers, as well as the characters, learn of critical developments as they are refracted through another character's consciousness, or in what somebody says offhandedly, or by means of a poetic image or symbol that brings a sudden burst of understanding. In James's late fiction, meanings are conveyed, as John Auchard has shown, through the "silences."[5] Effects are communicated via a glance; a mood is captured in a momentary intrusion of a shaft of light. The emotional aftereffects of a chance encounter linger and the characters ponder the meaning of gestures fraught with wider significance. As in life, great moral issues seem to dissolve into myriad small choices, and the continuous flow of little encounters sweeps the characters along toward ends that they cannot foresee.

Yet in Wings circumstances do not control events to the exclusion of human will. The Jamesian world is not like the naturalist order of a Zola or Dreiser novel, where the individual is subject to the iron determinism of circumstance. Individual moral choices do matter. Important corners are turned in *Wings,* and decisions are made at every turn that carry a string of consequences. For Kate, deciding to live with her aunt brings her under the sway of her aunt's values. In choosing money, and in postponing marriage to Densher, she turns her life onto the path of the London "scene." This scene is marked by crassness and grasping ambition. Densher's decision that he will be kind to Milly as the gentlemanly thing to do is a pious rationalization. Once he takes the first steps, he is implicated deeply in Kate's venture. He places himself on a slippery moral slope. Once in the action, he cannot get out. Milly encounters critical turning points, too, and in those moments she makes decisions that will shape her life. How long she can fight off her fate is in some measure a reflection of her own will and of whether she is fully engaged in life. She chooses to ignore Kate's warning to "drop us while you can." The scene in which Milly stands with Lord Mark in front of the Bronzino portrait that resembles her sticks in our minds as a decisive moment. She has the first symptoms of her illness on that occasion, and perhaps she surrenders to her fate and loses some of her will to live. Milly thereupon makes a series of important decisions. She decides to consult with Sir Luke Strett. She invites Kate to accompany her on the first visit to the doctor but not on the second visit, and she does not confide in Kate what the doctor tells her. Milly's pride thus assures that she will face her fate essentially alone.

Why does James—one of the most secular of authors, whose only religious inclination seems to have been a nodding interest in his brother William's ideas about consciousness and the afterlife[6]—choose the religious symbol of the dove for his heroine? At one level the answer seems obvious enough. Kate calls Milly a "dove" early in the novel when the two of them are alone in a drawing room, and just after Milly has had the thought that Kate is "like a panther" pacing before her. Milly's dove-like qualities and Kate's fierceness are nicely juxtaposed here for the reader. The dove image next appears in book seventh at Milly's grand party in Venice. Kate and Densher are watching Milly from across the room as Kate lays out her instructions to him concerning how he should maneuver to be assured of getting Milly's money. Milly is dressed in white at the party and wears white pearls, and the image of the dove pops into Kate's mind. But when Kate refers to Milly as a dove the word does not seem apt to Densher; he does not think of Milly as a passive, demure creature. However, a dove has large wings, and it strikes him that at the very moment they all are nestled under Milly's wings. Indeed, they have all lived for some time under Milly's patronage and protection. Psalm 55, it may be recalled, is actually a prayer for the release from suffering and persecution :

> My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; yea, I would wander afar, I would lodge in the wilderness, I would haste to find me a shelter from the raging wind and tempest" (verses 4-8).[7]

Is it a final irony of The Wings of the Dove that Milly escapes from—not to say, triumphs over—her tormentors? In giving away her fortune to Densher despite his deception, she has shown both the softness and the strength of her wings. She has demonstrated her generosity and forgiving spirit, and at the same time has exacted a certain vengeance. Kate and Densher apparently have become permanently estranged as a result of the bequest. Kate has learned that she cannot have everything. For Densher's part, his grand gesture of renunciation would leave him with nothing. Like all of Henry James's endings, the end of *Wings* is more of a beginning than a resolution: Will Densher be redeemed and will he find a new life without Kate? Will Kate free herself from her aunt and from the London "scene," or will she, after all, fall into a marriage with Lord Mark? Like Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors,* who realizes that money has poisoned his relationship with his patroness Mrs. Newsome, and like Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl,* who must at last confront her husband without the presence and emotional support of her father, Kate and Densher must build their lives anew with only a heightened moral awareness to guide them. For Henry James, there is a darkness and a sense of doom hovering over the scene. His characters, and the civilization they represent, may be incapable of redemption, and may instead spiral toward moral decay and social disintegration.

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Notes to the Introduction

1. F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Period,* London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1945.
2. William James to Henry James, letter dated May 4, 1907, in *The Letters* of *William James,* edited by Henry James, Boston, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920, vol. 2, p. 278.
3. James made this comment in a letter to Mrs. Cadwalader Jones, dated October 23, 1902; reprinted in *The Wings of the Dove,* Norton Critical Edition, second edition, edited by J. Donald Crowley and Richard A. Hocks, New York, W. W. Norton, 2003, p. 468.
4. The idea of the *ficelle* is discussed most extensively by James in the preface to *The Ambassadors* (see Henry James, The Art of the Novel: *Critical Prefaces,* with an introduction by Richard P. Blackmur, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937, pp. 307-327). The discussion in James's preface to *Wings* is also of interest in this connexion (see The *Art of the Novel,* pp. 46-47).
5. John Auchard, *Silence in Henry James: The Heritage of Symbolism and Decadence,* University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986; especially chapter 5 on *The Wings of the Dove.*
6. Henry James, "Is There a Life After Death," in *In After Days: Thoughts on the Future Life,* New York and London, Harper and Brothers, 1910, pp. 201-233.
7. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible,* Revised Standard Version, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 696-697.

Preface

The Wings of the Dove," published in 1902, represents to my memory a very old—if I shouldn't perhaps rather say a very young—motive; I can scarce remember the time when the situation on which this long-drawn fiction mainly rests was not vividly present to me. The idea, reduced to its essence, is that of a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamoured of the world; aware moreover of the condemnation and passionately desiring to "put in" before extinction as many of the finer vibrations as possible, and so achieve, however briefly and brokenly, the sense of having lived. Long had I turned it over, standing off from it, yet coming back to it; convinced of what might be done with it, yet seeing the theme as formidable.[1] The image so figured would be, at best, but half the matter; the rest would be all the picture of the struggle involved, the adventure brought about, the gain recorded or the loss incurred, the precious experience somehow compassed. These things, I had from the first felt, would require much working-out; that indeed was the case with most things worth working at all; yet there are subjects and subjects, and this one seemed particularly to bristle. It was formed, I judged, to make the wary adventurer walk round and round it—it had in fact a charm that invited and mystified alike that attention; not being somehow what one thought of as a "frank" subject, after the fashion of some, with its elements well in view and its whole character in its face. It stood there with secrets and compartments, with possible treacheries and traps; it might have a great deal to give, but would probably ask for equal services in return, and would collect this debt to the last shilling. It involved, to begin with, the placing in the strongest light a person infirm and ill—a case sure to prove difficult and to require much handling; though giving perhaps, with other matters, one of those chances for good taste, possibly even for the play of the very best in the world, that are not only always to be invoked and cultivated, but that are absolutely to be jumped at from the moment they make a sign.

Yes then, the case prescribed for its central figure a sick young woman, at the whole course of whose disintegration and the whole ordeal of whose consciousness one would have quite honestly to assist. The expression of her state and that of one's intimate relation to it might therefore well need to be discreet and ingenious; a reflexion that fortunately grew and grew, however, in proportion as I focussed my image—roundabout which, as it persisted, I repeat, the interesting possibilities and the attaching wonderments, not to say the insoluble mysteries, thickened apace. Why had one to look so straight in the face and so closely to cross-question that idea of making one's protagonist "sick"?—as if to be menaced with death or danger hadn't been from time immemorial, for heroine or hero, the very shortest of all cuts to the interesting state. Why should a figure be disqualified for a central position by the particular circumstance that might most quicken, that might crown with a fine intensity, its liability to many accidents, its consciousness of all relations? This circumstance, true enough, might disqualify it for many activities—even though we should have imputed to it the unsurpassable activity of passionate, of inspired resistance. This last fact was the real issue, for the way grew straight from the moment one recognised that the poet essentially can't be concerned with the act of dying. Let him deal with the sickest of the sick, it is still by the act of living that they appeal to him, and appeal the more as the conditions plot against them and prescribe the battle.[2] The process of life gives way fighting, and often may so shine out on the lost ground as in no other connexion. One had had moreover, as a various chronicler, one's secondary physical weaklings and failures, one's accessory invalids—introduced with a complacency that made light of criticism. To Ralph Touchett in "The Portrait of a Lady," for instance, his deplorable state of health was not only no drawback; I had clearly been right in counting it, for any happy effect he should produce, a positive good mark, a direct aid to pleasantness and vividness. The reason of this moreover could never in the world have been his fact of sex; since men, among the mortally afflicted, suffer on the whole more overtly and more grossly than women, and resist with a ruder, an inferior strategy. I had thus to take that anomaly for what it was worth, and I give it here but as one of the ambiguities amid which my subject ended by making itself at home and seating itself quite in confidence.

With the clearness I have just noted, accordingly, the last thing in the world it proposed to itself was to be the record predominantly of a collapse. I don't mean to say that my offered victim was not present to my imagination, constantly, as dragged by a greater force than any she herself could exert; she had been given me from far back as contesting every inch of the road, as catching at every object the grasp of which might make for delay, as clutching these things to the last moment of her strength. Such an attitude and such movements, the passion they expressed and the success they in fact represented, what were they in truth but the soul of drama?—which is the portrayal, as we know, of a catastrophe determined in spite of oppositions. My young woman would *herself* be the opposition—to the catastrophe announced by the associated Fates, powers conspiring to a sinister end and, with their command of means, finally achieving it, yet in such straits really to *stifle* the sacred spark that, obviously, a creature so animated, an adversary so subtle, couldn't but be felt

worthy, under whatever weaknesses, of the foreground and the limelight. She would meanwhile wish, moreover, all along, to live for particular things, she would found her struggle on particular human interests, which would inevitably determine, in respect to her, the attitude of other persons, persons affected in such a manner as to make them part of the action. If her impulse to wrest from her shrinking hour still as much of the fruit of life as possible, if this longing can take effect only by the aid of others, their participation (appealed to, entangled and coerced as they find themselves) becomes their drama too—that of their promoting her illusion, under her importunity, for reasons, for interests and advantages, from motives and points of view, of their own. Some of these promptings, evidently, would be of the highest order—others doubtless mightn't; but they would make up together, for her, contributively, her sum of experience, represent to her somehow, in good faith or in bad, what she should have *known*. Somehow, too, at such a rate, one would see the persons subject to them drawn in as by some pool of a Lorelei[a]—see them terrified and tempted and charmed; bribed away, it may even be, from more prescribed and natural orbits, inheriting from their connexion with her strange difficulties and still stranger opportunities, confronted with rare questions and called upon for new discriminations. Thus the scheme of her situation would, in a comprehensive way, see itself constituted; the rest of the interest would be in the number and nature of the particulars. Strong among these, naturally, the need that life should, apart from her infirmity, present itself to our young woman as quite dazzlingly liveable, and that if the great pang for her is in what she must give up we shall appreciate it the more from the sight of all she has.

One would see her then as possessed of all things, all but the single most precious assurance; freedom and money and a mobile mind and personal charm, the power to interest and attach; attributes, each one, enhancing the value of a future. From the moment his imagination began to deal with her at close quarters, in fact, nothing could more engage her designer than to work out the detail of her perfect rightness for her part; nothing above all more solicit him than to recognise fifty reasons for her national and social status. She should be the last fine flower—blooming alone, for the fullest attestation of her freedom—of an "old" New York stem; the happy congruities thus preserved for her being matters, however, that I may not now go into, and this even though the fine association that shall yet elsewhere await me is of a sort, at the best, rather to defy than to encourage exact expression. There goes with it, for the heroine of "The Wings of the Dove," a strong and special implication of liberty, liberty of action, of choice, of appreciation, of contact—proceeding from sources that provide better for large independence, I think, than any other conditions in the world—and this would be in particular what we should feel ourselves deeply concerned with. I had from far back mentally projected a certain sort of young American as more the "heir of all the ages" than any other young person whatever (and precisely on those grounds I have just glanced at but to pass them by for the moment); so that here was a chance to confer on some such figure a supremely touching value. To be the heir of all the ages only to know yourself, as that consciousness should deepen, balked of your inheritance, would be to play the part, it struck me, or at least to arrive at the type, in the light on the whole the most becoming. Otherwise, truly, what a perilous part to play *out*— what a suspicion of "swagger" in positively attempting it! So at least I could reason-so I even think I had to—to keep my subject to a decent compactness. For already, from an early stage, it had begun richly to people itself: the difficulty was to see whom the situation I had primarily projected might, by this, that or the other turn, *not* draw in. My business was to watch its turns as the fond parent watches a child perched, for its first riding-lesson, in the saddle; yet its interest, I had all the while to recall, was just in its making, on such a scale, for developments.

What one had discerned, at all events, from an early stage, was that a young person so devoted and exposed, a creature with her security hanging so by a hair, couldn't but fall somehow into some abysmal trap —this being, dramatically speaking, what such a situation most naturally implied and imposed. Didn't the truth and a great part of the interest also reside in the appearance that she would constitute for others (given her passionate yearning to live while she might) a complication as great as any they might constitute for herself?—which is what I mean when I speak of such matters as "natural." They would be as natural, these tragic, pathetic, ironic, these indeed for the most part sinister, liabilities, to her living associates, as they could be to herself as prime subject. If her story was to consist, as it could so little help doing, of her being let in, as we say, for this, that and the other irreducible anxiety, how could she not have put a premium on the acquisition, by any close sharer of her life, of a consciousness similarly embarrassed? I have named the Rhine-maiden, but our young friend's existence would create rather, all round her, very much that whirlpool movement of the waters produced by the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business; when we figure to ourselves the strong narrowing eddies, the immense force of suction, the general engulfment that, for any neighbouring object, makes immersion inevitable. I need scarce say, however, that in spite of these communities of doom I saw the main dramatic complication much more prepared *for* my vessel of sensibility than by her—the work of other hands (though with her own imbrued too, after all, in the measure of their never not being, in some direction, generous and extravagant, and thereby provoking).

The great point was, at all events, that if in a predicament she was to be, accordingly, it would be of the essence to create the predicament promptly and build it up solidly, so that it should have for us as much as possible its ominous air of awaiting her. That reflexion I found, betimes, not less inspiring than urgent; one

begins so, in such a business, by looking about for one's compositional key, unable as one can only be to move till one has found it. To start without it is to pretend to enter the train and, still more, to remain in one's seat, without a ticket. Well—in the steady light and for the continued charm of these verifications—I had secured my ticket over the tolerably long line laid down for "The Wings of the Dove" from the moment I had noted that there could be no full presentation of Milly Theale as *engaged* with elements amid which she was to draw her breath in such pain, should not the elements have been, with all solicitude, duly prefigured. If one had seen that her stricken state was but half her case, the correlative half being the state of others as affected by her (they too should have a "case," bless them, quite as much as she!) then I was free to choose, as it were, the half with which I should begin. If, as I had fondly noted, the little world determined for her was to "bristle"—I delighted in the term!—with meanings, so, by the same token, could I but make my medal hang free, its obverse and its reverse, its face and its back, would beautifully become optional for the spectator. I somehow wanted them correspondingly embossed, wanted them inscribed and figured with an equal salience; yet it was none the less visibly my "key," as I have said, that though my regenerate young New Yorker, and what might depend on her, should form my centre, my circumference was every whit as treatable. Therefore I must trust myself to know when to proceed from the one and when from the other. Preparatively and, as it were, yearningly—given the whole ground—one began, in the event, with the outer ring, approaching the centre thus by narrowing circumvallations. There, full-blown, accordingly, from one hour to the other, rose one's process—for which there remained all the while so many amusing formulae.

The medal did hang free—I felt this perfectly, I remember, from the moment I had comfortably laid the ground provided in my first Book, ground from which Milly is superficially so absent. I scarce remember perhaps a case—I like even with this public grossness to insist on it—in which the curiosity of "beginning far back," as far back as possible, and even of going, to the same tune, far "behind," that is behind the face of the subject, was to assert itself with less scruple. The free hand, in this connexion, was above all agreeable—the hand the freedom of which I owed to the fact that the work had ignominiously failed, in advance, of all power to see itself "serialized." This failure had repeatedly waited, for me, upon shorter fictions; but the considerable production we here discuss was (as "The Golden Bowl" was to be, two or three years later) born, not otherwise than a little bewilderedly, into a world of periodicals and editors, of roaring "successes" in fine, amid which it was well-nigh unnotedly to lose itself. There is fortunately something bracing, ever, in the alpine chill, that of some high icy *arête,*[b]shed by the cold editorial shoulder; sour grapes may at moments fairly intoxicate and the story-teller worth his salt rejoice to feel again how many accommodations he can practise. Those addressed to "conditions of publication" have in a degree their interesting, or at least their provoking, side; but their charm is qualified by the fact that the prescriptions here spring from a soil often wholly alien to the ground of the work itself. They are almost always the fruit of another air altogether and conceived in a light liable to represent *within* the circle of the work itself little else than darkness. Still, when not too blighting, they often operate as a tax on ingenuity—that ingenuity of the expert craftsman which likes to be taxed very much to the same tune to which a well-bred horse likes to be saddled. The best and finest ingenuities, nevertheless, with all respect to that truth, are apt to be, not one's compromises, but one's fullest conformities, and I well remember, in the case be fore us, the pleasure of feeling my divisions, my proportions and general rhythm, rest all on permanent rather than in any degree on momentary proprieties. It was enough for my alternations, thus, that they were good in themselves; it was in fact so much for them that I really think any further account of the constitution of the book reduces itself to a just notation of the law they followed.

There was the "fun," to begin with, of establishing one's successive centres—of fixing them so exactly that the portions of the subject commanded by them as by happy points of view, and accordingly treated from them, would constitute, so to speak, sufficiently solid blocks of wrought material, squared to the sharp edge, as to have weight and mass and carrying power; to make for construction, that is, to conduce to effect and to provide for beauty. Such a block, obviously, is the whole preliminary presentation of Kate Croy, which, from the first, I recall, absolutely declined to enact itself save in terms of amplitude. Terms of amplitude, terms of atmosphere, those terms, and those terms only, in which images assert their fulness and roundness, their power to revolve, so that they have sides and backs, parts in the shade as true as parts in the sun—these were plainly to be my conditions, right and left, and I was so far from overrating the amount of expression the whole thing, as I saw and felt it, would require, that to retrace the way at present is, alas, more than anything else, but to mark the gaps and the lapses, to miss, one by one, the intentions that, with the best will in the world, were not to fructify. I have just said that the process of the general attempt is described from the moment the "blocks" are numbered, and that would be a true enough picture of my plan. Yet one's plan, alas, is one thing and one's result another; so that I am perhaps nearer the point in saying that this last strikes me at present as most characterised by the happy features that *were*, under my first and most blest illusion, to have contributed to it. I meet them all, as I renew acquaintance, I mourn for them all as I remount the stream, the absent values, the palpable voids, the missing links, the mocking shadows, that reflect, taken together, the early bloom of one's good faith. Such cases are of course far from abnormal—so far from it that some acute mind ought surely to have worked out by this time the "law" of the degree in which the artist's energy fairly

depends on his fallibility. How much and how often, and in what connexions and with what almost infinite variety, must he be a dupe, that of his prime object, to be at all measurably a master, that of his actual substitute for it—or in other words at all appreciably to exist? He places, after an earnest survey, the piers of his bridge—he has at least sounded deep enough, heaven knows, for their brave position; yet the bridge spans the stream, after the fact, in apparently complete independence of these properties, the principal grace of the original design. They were an illusion, for their necessary hour; but the span itself, whether of a single arch or of many, seems by the oddest chance in the world to be a reality; since, actually, the rueful builder, passing under it, sees figures and hears sounds above: he makes out, with his heart in his throat, that it bears and is positively being "used."

The building-up of Kate Croy's consciousness to the capacity for the load little by little to be laid on it was, by way of example, to have been a matter of as many hundred close-packed bricks as there are actually poor dozens. The image of her so compromised and compromising father was all effectively to have pervaded her life, was in a certain particular way to have tampered with her spring; by which I mean that the shame and the irritation and the depression, the general poisonous influence of him, were to have been *shown*, with a truth beyond the compass even of one's most emphasised "word of honour" for it, to do these things. But where do we find him, at this time of day, save in a beggarly scene or two which scarce arrives at the dignity of functional reference? He but "looks in," poor beautiful dazzling, damning apparition that he was to have been; he sees his place so taken, his company so little missed, that, cocking again that fine form of hat which has yielded him for so long his one effective cover, he turns away with a whistle of indifference that nobly misrepresents the deepest disappointment of his life. One's poor word of honour has had to pass muster for the show. Every one, in short, was to have enjoyed so much better a chance that, like stars of the theatre condescending to oblige, they have had to take small parts, to content themselves with minor identities, in order to come on at all. I haven't the heart now, I confess, to adduce the detail of so many lapsed importances; the explanation of most of which, after all, I take to have been in the crudity of a truth beating full upon me through these reconsiderations, the odd inveteracy with which picture, at almost any turn, is jealous of drama, and drama (though on the whole with a greater patience, I think) suspicious of picture. Between them, no doubt, they do much for the theme; yet each baffles insidiously the other's ideal and eats round the edges of its position; each is too ready to say "I can take the thing for 'done' only when done in *my way*." The residuum of comfort for the witness of these broils is of course meanwhile in the convenient reflexion, invented for him in the twilight of time and the infancy of art by the Angel, not to say by the Demon, of Compromise, that nothing is so easy to "do" as not to be thankful for almost any stray help in its getting done. It wasn't, after this fashion, by making good one's dream of Lionel Croy that my structure was to stand on its feet—any more than it was by letting him go that I was to be left irretrievably lamenting. The who and the what, the how and the why, the whence and the whither of Merton Densher, these, no less, were quantities and attributes that should have danced about him with the antique grace of nymphs and fauns circling round a bland Hermes[c] and crowning him with flowers. One's main anxiety, for each one's agents, is that the air of each shall be *given*; but what does the whole thing become, after all, as one goes, but a series of sad places at which the hand of generosity has been cautioned and stayed? The young man's situation, personal, professional, social, was to have been so decanted for us that we should get all the taste; we were to have been penetrated with Mrs. Lowder, by the same token, saturated with her presence, her "personality," and felt all her weight in the scale. We were to have revelled in Mrs. Stringham, my heroine's attendant friend, her fairly choral Bostonian, a subject for innumerable touches, and in an extended and above all an *animated* reflexion of Milly Theale's experience of English society; just as the strength and sense of the situation in Venice, for our gathered friends, was to have come to us in a deeper draught out of a larger cup, and just as the pattern of Densher's final position and fullest consciousness there was to have been marked in fine stitches, all silk and gold, all pink and silver, that have had to remain, alas, but entwined upon the reel.

It isn't, no doubt, however—to recover, after all, our critical balance—that the pattern didn't, for each compartment, get itself somehow wrought, and that we mightn't thus, piece by piece, opportunity offering, trace it over and study it. The thing has doubtless, as a whole, the advantage that each piece is true to its pattern, and that while it pretends to make no simple statement it yet never lets go its scheme of clearness. Applications of this scheme are continuous and exemplary enough, though I scarce leave myself room to glance at them. The clearness is obtained in Book First—or otherwise, as I have said, in the first "piece," each Book having its subordinate and contributive pattern—through the associated consciousness of my two prime young persons, for whom I early recognised that I should have to consent, under stress, to a practical *fusion* of consciousness. It is into the young woman's "ken" that Merton Densher is represented as swimming; but her mind is not here, rigorously, the one reflector. There are occasions when it plays this part, just as there are others when his plays it, and an intelligible plan consists naturally not a little in fixing such occasions and making them, on one side and the other, sufficient to themselves. Do I sometimes in fact forfeit the advantage of that distinctness? Do I ever abandon one centre for another after the former has been postulated? From the moment we proceed by "centres"—and I have never, I confess, embraced the logic of any superior process—they must be, each, as a basis, selected and fixed; after which it is that, in the high interest of economy of

treatment, they determine and rule. There is no economy of treatment without an adopted, a related point of view,[3] and though I understand, under certain degrees of pressure, a represented community of vision between several parties to the action when it makes for concentration, I understand no breaking-up of the register, no sacrifice of the recording consistency, that doesn't rather scatter and weaken. In this truth resides the secret of the discriminated occasion—that aspect of the subject which we have our noted choice of treating either as picture or scenically, but which is apt, I think, to show its fullest worth in the Scene. Beautiful exceedingly, for that matter, those occasions or parts of an occasion when the boundary line between picture and scene bears a little the weight of the double pressure.

Such would be the case, I can't but surmise, for the long passage that forms here before us the opening of Book Fourth, where all the offered life centres, to intensity, in the disclosure of Milly's single throbbing consciousness, but where, for a due rendering, everything has to be brought to a head. This passage, the view of her introduction to Mrs. Lowder's circle, has its mate, for illustration, later on in the book and at a crisis for which the occasion submits to another rule. My registers or "reflectors," as I so conveniently name them (burnished indeed as they generally are by the intelligence, the curiosity, the passion, the force of the moment, whatever it be directing them), work, as we have seen, in arranged alternation; so that in the second connexion I here glance at it is Kate Croy who is; "for all she is worth," turned on. She is turned on largely at Venice, where the appearances, rich and obscure and portentous (another word I rejoice in) as they have by that time become and altogether exquisite as they remain, are treated almost wholly through her vision of them and Densher's (as to the lucid interplay of which conspiring and conflicting agents there would be a great deal to say). It is in Kate's consciousness that at the stage in question the drama is brought to a head, and the occasion on which, in the splendid saloon of poor Milly's hired palace, she takes the measure of her friend's festal evening, squares itself to the same synthetic firmness as the compact constructional block inserted by the scene at Lancaster Gate. Milly's situation ceases at a given moment to be "renderable" in terms closer than those supplied by Kate's intelligence, or, in a richer degree, by Densher's, or, for one fond hour, by poor Mrs. Stringham's (since to that sole brief futility is this last participant, crowned by my original plan with the quaintest functions, in fact reduced); just as Kate's relation with Densher and Densher's with Kate have ceased previously, and are then to cease again, to be projected for us, so far as Milly is concerned with them, on any more responsible plate than that of the latter's admirable anxiety. It is as if, for these aspects, the impersonal plate—in other words the poor author's comparatively cold affirmation or thin guarantee—had felt itself a figure of attestation at once too gross and too bloodless, likely to affect us as an abuse of privilege when not as an abuse of knowledge.

Heaven forbid, we say to ourselves during almost the whole Venetian climax, heaven forbid we should "know" anything more of our ravaged sister than what Densher darkly pieces together, or than what Kate Croy pays, heroically, it must be owned, at the hour of her visit alone to Densher's lodging, for her superior handling and her dire profanation of. For we have time, while this passage lasts, to turn round critically; we have time to recognise intentions and proprieties; we have time to catch glimpses of an economy of composition, as I put it, interesting in itself: all in spite of the author's scarce more than half-dissimulated despair at the inveterate displacement of his general centre. "The Wings of the Dove" happens to offer perhaps the most striking example I may cite (though with public penance for it already performed) of my regular failure to keep the appointed halves of my whole equal. Here the makeshift middle—for which the best I can say is that it's always rueful and never impudent—reigns with even more than its customary contrition, though passing itself off perhaps too with more than its usual craft. Nowhere, I seem to recall, had the need of dissimulation been felt so as anguish; nowhere had I condemned a luckless theme to complete its revolution, burdened with the accumulation of its difficulties, the difficulties that grow with a theme's development, in quarters so cramped. Of course, as every novelist knows, it is difficulty that inspires; only, for that perfection of charm, it must have been difficulty inherent and congenital, and not difficulty "caught" by the wrong frequentations. The latter half, that is the false and deformed half, of "The Wings" would verily, I think, form a signal object-lesson for a literary critic bent on improving his occasion to the profit of the budding artist. This whole corner of the picture bristles with "dodges"—such as he should feel himself all committed to recognise and denounce—for disguising the reduced scale of the exhibition, for foreshortening at any cost, for imparting to patches the value of presences, for dressing objects in an *air* as of the dimensions they can't possibly have. Thus he would have his free hand for pointing out what a tangled web we weave when—well, when, through our mislaying or otherwise trifling with our blest pair of compasses, we have to produce the illusion of mass without the illusion of extent. *There* is a job quite to the measure of most of our monitors—and with the interest for them well enhanced by the preliminary cunning quest for the spot where deformity has begun.

I recognise meanwhile, throughout the long earlier reach of the book, not only no deformities but, I think, a positively close and felicitous application of method, the preserved consistencies of which, often illusive, but never really lapsing, it would be of a certain diversion, and might be of some profit, to follow. The author's accepted task at the outset has been to suggest with force the nature of the tie formed between the two young persons first introduced—to give the full impression of its peculiar worried and baffled, yet clinging and

confident, ardour. The picture constituted, so far as may be, is that of a pair of natures well-nigh consumed by a sense of their intimate affinity and congruity, the reciprocity of their desire, and thus passionately impatient of barriers and delays, yet with qualities of intelligence and character that they are meanwhile extraordinarily able to draw upon for the enrichment of their relation, the extension of their prospect and the support of their "game." They are far from a common couple, Merton Densher and Kate Croy, as befits the remarkable fashion in which fortune was to waylay and opportunity was to distinguish them—the whole strange truth of their response to which opening involves also, in its order, no vulgar art of exhibition; but what they have most to tell us is that, all unconsciously and with the best faith in the world, all by mere force of the terms of their superior passion combined with their superior diplomacy, they are laying a trap for the great innocence to come. If I like, as I have confessed, the "portentous" look, I was perhaps never to set so high a value on it as for all this prompt provision of forces unwittingly waiting to close round my eager heroine (to the eventual deep chill of her eagerness) as the result of her mere lifting of a latch. Infinitely interesting to have built up the relation of the others to the point at which its aching restlessness, its need to affirm itself otherwise than by an exasperated patience, meets as with instinctive relief and recognition the possibilities shining out of Milly Theale. Infinitely interesting to have prepared and organised, correspondingly, that young woman's precipitations and liabilities, to have constructed, for Drama essentially to take possession, the whole bright house of her exposure.

These references, however, reflect too little of the detail of the treatment imposed; such a detail as I for instance get hold of in the fact of Densher's interview with Mrs. Lowder before he goes to America. It forms, in this preliminary picture, the one patch not strictly seen over Kate Croy's shoulder; though it's notable that immediately after, at the first possible moment, we surrender again to our major convenience, as it happens to be at the time, that of our drawing breath through the young woman's lungs. Once more, in other words, before we know it, Densher's direct vision of the scene at Lancaster Gate is replaced by her apprehension, her contributive assimilation, of his experience: it melts back into that accumulation, which we have been, as it were, saving up. Does my apparent deviation here count accordingly as a muddle?—one of the muddles ever blooming so thick in any soil that fails to grow reasons and determinants. No, distinctly not; for I had definitely opened the door, as attention of perusal of the first two Books will show, to the subjective community of my young pair. (Attention of perusal, I thus confess by the way, is what I at every point, as well as here, absolutely invoke and take for granted; a truth I avail myself of this occasion to note once for all—in the interest of that variety of ideal reigning, I gather, in the connexion. The enjoyment of a work of art, the acceptance of an irresistible illusion, constituting, to my sense, our highest experience of "luxury," the luxury is not greatest, by my consequent measure, when the work asks for as little attention as possible. It is greatest, it is delightfully, divinely great, when we feel the surface, like the thick ice of the skater's pond, bear without cracking the strongest pressure we throw on it. The sound of the crack one may recognise, but never surely to call it a luxury.) That I had scarce availed myself of the privilege of seeing with Densher's eyes is another matter; the point is that I had intelligently marked my possible, my occasional need of it. So, at all events, the constructional "block" of the first two Books compactly forms itself. A new block, all of the squarest and not a little of the smoothest, begins with the Third—by which I mean of course a new mass of interest governed from a new centre. Here again I make prudent *provision*—to be sure to keep my centre strong. It dwells mainly, we at once see, in the depths of Milly Theale's "case," where, close beside it, however, we meet a supplementary reflector, that of the lucid even though so quivering spirit of her dedicated friend.

The more or less associated consciousness of the two women deals thus, unequally, with the next presented face of the subject—deals with it to the exclusion of the dealing of others; and if, for a highly particular moment, I allot to Mrs. Stringham the responsibility of the direct appeal to us, it is again, charming to relate, on behalf of that play of the portentous which I cherish so as a "value" and am accordingly for ever setting in motion. There is an hour of evening, on the alpine height, at which it becomes of the last importance that our young woman should testify eminently in this direction. But as I was to find it long since of a blest wisdom that no expense should be incurred or met, in any corner of picture of mine, without some concrete image of the account kept of it, that is of its being organically re-economised, so under that dispensation Mrs. Stringham has to register the transaction. Book Fifth is a new block mainly in its provision of a new set of occasions, which readopt, for their order, the previous centre, Milly's now almost full-blown consciousness. At my game, with renewed zest, of driving portents home, I have by this time all the choice of those that are to brush that surface with a dark wing. They are used, to our profit, on an elastic but a definite system; by which I mean that having to sound here and there a little deep, as a test, for my basis of method, I find it everywhere obstinately present. It draws the "occasion" into tune and keeps it so, to repeat my tiresome term; my nearest approach to muddlement is to have sometimes—but not too often—to break my occasions small. Some of them succeed in remaining ample and in really aspiring then to the higher, the sustained lucidity. The whole actual centre of the work, resting on a misplaced pivot and lodged in Book Fifth, pretends to a long reach, or at any rate to the larger foreshortening—though bringing home to me, on reperusal, what I find striking, charming and curious, the author's instinct everywhere for the *indirect* presentation of his main image. I note how, again and again, I go but a little way with the direct—that is with the straight exhibition of Milly; it

resorts for relief, this process, whenever it can, to some kinder, some merciful indirection: all as if to approach her circuitously, deal with her at second hand, as an unspotted princess is ever dealt with; the pressure all round her kept easy for her, the sounds, the movements regulated, the forms and ambiguities made charming. All of which proceeds, obviously, from her painter's tenderness of imagination about her, which reduces him to watching her, as it were, through the successive windows of other people's interest in her. So, if we talk of princesses, do the balconies opposite the palace gates, do the coigns of vantage and respect enjoyed for a fee, rake from afar the mystic figure in the gilded coach as it comes forth into the great *place*. But my use of windows and balconies is doubtless at best an extravagance by itself, and as to what there may be to note, of this and other super-subtleties, other arch-refinements, of tact and taste, of design and instinct, in "The Wings of the Dove," I become conscious of overstepping my space without having brought the full quantity to light. The failure leaves me with a burden of residuary comment of which I yet boldly hope elsewhere to discharge myself.

HENRY JAMES

VOLUME I

BOOK FIRST

—I—

She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him. It was at this point, however, that she remained; changing her place, moving from the shabby sofa to the armchair upholstered in a glazed cloth that gave at once—she had tried it—the sense of the slippery and of the sticky. She had looked at the sallow prints on the walls and at the lonely magazine, a year old, that combined, with a small lamp in coloured glass and a knitted white centre-piece wanting in freshness, to enhance the effect of the purplish cloth on the principal table; she had above all from time to time taken a brief stand on the small balcony to which the pair of long windows gave access. The vulgar little street, in this view, offered scant relief from the vulgar little room; its main office was to suggest to her that the narrow black house-fronts, adjusted to a standard that would have been low even for backs, constituted quite the publicity implied by such privacies. One felt them in the room exactly as one felt the room—the hundred like it or worse—in the street. Each time she turned in again, each time, in her impatience, she gave him up, it was to sound to a deeper depth, while she tasted the faint flat emanation of things, the failure of fortune and of honour. If she continued to wait it was really in a manner that she mightn't add the shame of fear, of individual, of personal collapse, to all the other shames. To feel the street, to feel the room, to feel the table-cloth and the centre-piece and the lamp, gave her a small salutary sense at least of neither shirking nor lying. This whole vision was the worse thing yet—as including in particular the interview to which she had braced herself; and for what had she come but for the worst? She tried to be sad so as not to be angry, but it made her angry that she couldn't be sad. And yet where was misery, misery too beaten for blame and chalk-marked by fate like a "lot" at a common auction, if not in these merciless signs of mere mean stale feelings?

Her father's life, her sister's, her own, that of her two lost brothers—the whole history of their house had the effect of some fine florid voluminous phrase, say even a musical, that dropped first into words and notes without sense and then, hanging unfinished, into no words or any notes at all. Why should a set of people have been put in motion, on such a scale and with such an air of being equipped for a profitable journey, only to break down without an accident, to stretch themselves in the wayside dust without a reason? The answer to these questions was not in Chirk Street, but the questions themselves bristled there, and the girl's repeated pause before the mirror and the chimney-place might have represented her nearest approach to an escape from them. Wasn't it in fact the partial escape from this "worst" in which she was steeped to be able to make herself out again as agreeable to see? She stared into the tarnished glass too hard indeed to be staring at her beauty alone. She readjusted the poise of her black closely-feathered hat; retouched, beneath it, the thick fall of her dusky hair; kept her eyes aslant no less on her beautiful averted than on her beautiful presented oval. She was dressed altogether in black, which gave an even tone, by contrast, to her clear face and made her hair more harmoniously dark. Outside, on the balcony, her eyes showed as blue; within, at the mirror, they showed almost as black. She was handsome, but the degree of it was not sustained by items and aids; a circumstance moreover playing its part at almost any time in the impression she produced. The impression was one that remained, but as regards the sources of it no sum in addition would have made up the total. She had stature without height, grace without motion, presence without mass. Slender and simple, frequently soundless, she was somehow always in the line of the eye—she counted singularly for its pleasure. More "dressed," often, with fewer accessories, than other women, or less dressed, should occasion require, with more, she probably couldn't have given the key to these felicities. They were mysteries of which her friends were conscious—those friends whose general explanation was to say that she was clever, whether or not it were taken by the world as the cause or as the effect of her charm. If she saw more things than her fine face in the dull glass of her father's lodgings she might have seen that after all she was not herself a fact in the collapse. She didn't hold herself cheap, she didn't make for misery. Personally, no, she wasn't chalk-marked for auction. She hadn't given up yet, and the broken sentence, if she was the last word, *would* end with a sort of meaning. There was a minute during which, though her eyes were fixed, she quite visibly lost herself in the thought of the way she might still pull things round had she only been a man. It was the name, above all, she would take in hand—the precious name she so liked and that, in spite of the harm her wretched father had done it, wasn't yet past praying for. She loved it in fact the more tenderly for that bleeding wound. But what could a penniless girl do with it but let it go?

When her father at last appeared she became, as usual, instantly aware of the futility of any effort to hold him to anything. He had written her he was ill, too ill to leave his room, and that he must see her without delay; and if this had been, as was probable, the sketch of a design he was indifferent even to the moderate finish required for deception. He had clearly wanted, for the perversities he called his reasons, to see her, just as she herself had sharpened for a talk; but she now again felt, in the inevitability of the freedom he used with her, all the old ache, her poor mother's very own, that he couldn't touch you ever so lightly without setting up. No relation with him could be so short or so superficial as not to be somehow to your hurt; and this, in the strangest way in the world, not because he desired it to be—feeling often, as he surely must, the profit for him of its not being—but because there was never a mistake for you that he could leave unmade, nor a conviction of his impossibility in you that he could approach you without strengthening. He might have awaited her on the sofa in his sitting-room, or might have stayed in bed and received her in that situation. She was glad to be spared the sight of such penetralia, but it would have reminded her a little less that there was no truth in him. This was the weariness of every fresh meeting; he dealt out lies as he might the cards from the greasy old pack for the game of diplomacy to which you were to sit down with him. The inconvenience—as always happens in such cases—was not that you minded what was false, but that you missed what was true. He might be ill and it might suit you to know it, but no contact with him, for this, could ever be straight enough. Just so he even might die, but Kate fairly wondered on what evidence of his own she would some day have to believe it.

He had not at present come down from his room, which she knew to be above the one they were in: he had already been out of the house, though he would either, should she challenge him, deny it or present it as a proof of his extremity. She had, however, by this time, quite ceased to challenge him; not only, face to face with him, vain irritation dropped, but he breathed upon the tragic consciousness in such a way that after a moment nothing of it was left. The difficulty was not less that he breathed in the same way upon the comic: she almost believed that with this latter she might still have found a foothold for clinging to him. He had ceased to be amusing—he was really too inhuman. His perfect look, which had floated him so long, was practically perfect still; but one had long since for every occasion taken it for granted. Nothing could have better shown than the actual how right one had been. He looked exactly as much as usual—all pink and silver as to skin and hair, all straightness and starch as to figure and dress; the man in the world least connected with anything unpleasant. He was so particularly the English gentleman and the fortunate settled normal person. Seen at a foreign table d'hôte he suggested but one thing: "In what perfection England produces them!" He had kind safe eyes, and a voice which, for all its clean fulness, told the quiet tale of its having never had once to raise itself. Life had met him so, halfway, and had turned round so to walk with him, placing a hand in his arm and fondly leaving him to choose the pace. Those who knew him a little said "How he does dress!"—those who knew him better said "How does he?" The one stray gleam of comedy just now in his daughter's eyes was the absurd feeling he momentarily made her have of being herself "looked up" by him in sordid lodgings. For a minute after he came in it was as if the place were her own and he the visitor with susceptibilities. He gave you absurd feelings, he had indescribable arts, that quite turned the tables: this had been always how he came to see her mother so long as her mother would see him. He came from places they had often not known about, but he patronised Lexham Gardens. Kate's only actual expression of impatience, however, was "I'm glad you're so much better!"

"I'm not so much better, my dear—I'm exceedingly unwell; the proof of which is precisely that I've been out to the chemist's—that beastly fellow at the corner." So Mr. Croy showed he could qualify the humble hand that assuaged him. "I'm taking something he has made up for me. It's just why I've sent for you—that you may see me as I really am."

"Oh papa, it's long since I've ceased to see you otherwise than as you really are! I think we've all arrived by this time at the right word for that: 'You're beautiful—n'en *parlons plus.*'[d] You're as beautiful as ever—you look lovely." He judged meanwhile her own appearance, as she knew she could always trust him to do; recognising, estimating, sometimes disapproving, what she wore, showing her the interest he continued to take in her. He might really take none at all, yet she virtually knew herself the creature in the world to whom he was least indifferent. She had often enough wondered what on earth, at the pass he had reached, could give him pleasure, and had come back on these occasions to that. It gave him pleasure that she was handsome, that she was in her way a tangible value. It was at least as marked, nevertheless, that he derived none from similar conditions, so far as they were similar, in his other child. Poor Marian might be handsome, but he certainly didn't care. The hitch here of course was that, with whatever beauty, her sister, widowed and almost in want, with four bouncing children, had no such measure. She asked him the next thing how long he had been in his actual quarters, though aware of how little it mattered, how little any answer he might make would probably have in common with the truth. She failed in fact to notice his answer, truthful or not, already occupied as she was with what she had on her own side to say to him. This was really what had made her wait—what superseded the small remainder of her resentment at his constant practical impertinence; the result of all of which was that within a minute she had brought it out. "Yes—even now I'm willing to go with you. I don't know what you may have wished to say to me, and even if you hadn't written you would within a day or two have heard from me. Things have happened, and I've only waited, for seeing you, till I should be

quite sure. I *am* quite sure. I'll go with you."

It produced an effect. "Go with me where?"

"Anywhere. I'll stay with you. Even here." She had taken off her gloves and, as if she had arrived with her plan, she sat down.

Lionel Croy hung about in his disengaged way—hovered there as if looking, in consequence of her words, for a pretext to back out easily: on which she immediately saw she had discounted, as it might be called, what he had himself been preparing. He wished her not to come to him, still less to settle with him, and had sent for her to give her up with some style and state; a part of the beauty of which, however, was to have been his sacrifice to her own detachment. There was no style, no state, unless she wished to forsake him. His idea had accordingly been to surrender her to her wish with all nobleness; it had by no means been to have positively to keep her off. She cared, however, not a straw for his embarrassment—feeling how little, on her own part, she was moved by charity. She had seen him, first and last, in so many attitudes that she could now deprive him quite without compunction of the luxury of a new one. Yet she felt the disconcerted gasp in his tone as he said: "Oh my child, I can never consent to that!"

"What then are you going to do?"

"I'm turning it over," said Lionel Croy. "You may imagine if I'm not thinking."

"Haven't you thought then," his daughter asked, "of what I speak of? I mean of my being ready."

Standing before her with his hands behind him and his legs a little apart, he swayed slightly to and fro, inclined toward her as if rising on his toes. It had an effect of conscientious deliberation. "No—I haven't. I couldn't. I wouldn't." It was so respectable a show that she felt afresh, and with the memory of their old despair, the despair at home, how little, his appearance ever by any chance told about him. His plausibility had been the heaviest of her mother's crosses; inevitably so much more present to the world than whatever it was that was horrid—thank God they didn't really know!—that he had done. He had positively been, in his way, by the force of his particular type, a terrible husband not to live with; this type reflecting so invidiously on the woman who had found him distasteful. Had this thereby not kept directly present to Kate herself that it might, on some sides, prove no light thing for her to leave uncompanion'd a parent with such a face and such a manner? Yet if there was much she neither knew nor dreamed of it passed between them at this very moment that he was quite familiar with himself as the subject of such quandaries. If he recognised his younger daughter's happy aspect as a tangible value, he had from the first still more exactly appraised every point of his own. The great wonder was not that in spite of everything these points had helped him; the great wonder was that they hadn't helped him more. However, it was, to its eternal recurrent tune, helping him all the while; her drop into patience with him showed how it was helping him at this moment. She saw the next instant precisely the line he would take. "Do you really ask me to believe you've been making up your mind to that?"

She had to consider her own line. "I don't think I care, papa, what you believe. I never, for that matter, think of you as believing anything; hardly more," she permitted herself to add, "than I ever think of you as yourself believed. I don't know you, father, you see."

"And it's your idea that you may make that up?"

"Oh dear, no; not at all. That's no part of the question. If I haven't understood you by this time I never shall, and it doesn't matter. It has seemed to me you may be lived with, but not that you may be understood. Of course I've not the least idea how you get on."

"I don't get on," Mr. Croy almost gaily replied.

His daughter took the place in again, and it might well have seemed odd that with so little to meet the eye there should be so much to show. What showed was the ugliness—so positive and palpable that it was somehow sustaining. It was a medium, a setting, and to that extent, after all, a dreadful sign of life; so that it fairly gave point to her answer. "Oh I beg your pardon. You flourish."

"Do you throw it up at me again," he pleasantly put to her, "that I've not made away with myself?"

She treated the question as needing no reply; she sat there for real things. "You know how all our anxieties, under mamma's will, have Come out. She had still less to leave than she feared. We don't know how we lived. It all makes up about two hundred a year for Marian, and two for me, but I give up a hundred to Marian."

"Oh you weak thing!" her father sighed as from depths of enlightened experience.

"For you and me together," she went on, "the other hundred would do something."

"And what would do the rest?"

“Can you yourself do nothing?”

He gave her a look; then, slipping his hands into his pockets and turning away, stood for a little at the window she had left open. She said nothing more—she had placed him there with that question, and the silence lasted a minute, broken by the call of an appealing costermonger, which came in with the mild March air, with the shabby sunshine, fearfully unbecoming to the room, and with the small homely hum of Chirk Street. Presently he moved nearer, but as if her question had quite dropped. “I don’t see what has so suddenly wound you up.”

“I should have thought you might perhaps guess. Let me at any rate tell you. Aunt Maud has made me a proposal. But she has also made me a condition. She wants to keep me.”

“And what in the world else *could* she possibly want?”

“Oh I don’t know—many things. I’m not so precious a capture,” the girl a little dryly explained. “No one has ever wanted to keep me before.”

Looking always what was proper, her father looked now still more surprised than interested. “You’ve not had proposals?” He spoke as if that were incredible of Lionel Croy’s daughter; as if indeed such an admission scarce consorted, even in filial intimacy, with her high spirit and general form.

“Not from rich relations. She’s extremely kind to me, but it’s time, she says, that we should understand each other.”

Mr. Croy fully assented. “Of course it is—high time; and I can quite imagine what she means by it.”

“Are you very sure?”

“Oh perfectly. She means that she’ll ‘do’ for you handsomely if you’ll break off all relations with me. You speak of her condition. Her condition’s of course that.”

“Well then,” said Kate, “it’s what has wound me up. Here I am.”

He showed with a gesture how thoroughly he had taken it in; after which, within a few seconds, he had quite congruously turned the situation about. “Do you really suppose me in a position to justify your throwing yourself upon me?”

She waited a little, but when she spoke it was clear. “Yes.”

“Well then, you’re of feebler intelligence than I should have ventured to suppose you.”

“Why so? You live. You flourish. You bloom.”

“Ah how you’ve all always hated me!” he murmured with a pensive gaze again at the window.

“No one could be less of a mere cherished memory,” she declared as if she had not heard him. “You’re an actual person, if there ever was one. We agreed just now that you’re beautiful. You strike me, you know, as—in your own way—much more firm on your feet than I. Don’t put it to me therefore as monstrous that the fact that we’re after all parent and child should at present in some manner count for us. My idea has been that it should have some effect for each of us. I don’t at all, as I told you just now,” she pursued, “make out your life; but whatever it is I hereby offer to accept it. And, on my side, I’ll do everything I can for you.”

“I see,” said Lionel Croy. Then with the sound of extreme relevance: “And what *can* you?” She only, at this, hesitated, and he took up her silence. “You can describe yourself—*to* yourself—as, in a fine flight, giving up your aunt for me; but what good, I should like to know, would your fine flight do me?” As she still said nothing he developed a little. “We’re not possessed of so much, at this charming pass, please to remember, as that we can afford not to take hold of any perch held out to us. I like the way you talk, my dear, about ”giving up“! One doesn’t give up the use of a spoon because one’s reduced to living on broth. And your spoon, that is your aunt, please consider, is partly mine as well.” She rose now, as if in sight of the term of her effort, in sight of the futility and the weariness of many things, and moved back to the poor little glass with which she had communed before. She retouched here again the poise of her hat, and this brought to her father’s lips another remark—in which impatience, however, had already been replaced by a free flare of appreciation. “Oh you’re all right! Don’t muddle yourself up with *me!”*

His daughter turned round to him. “The condition Aunt Maud makes is that I shall have absolutely nothing to do with you; never see you, nor speak nor write to you, never go near you nor make you a sign, nor hold any sort of communication with you. What she requires is that you shall simply cease to exist for me.”

He had always seemed—it was one of the marks of what they called the “unspeakable” in him—to walk a little more on his toes, as if for jauntiness, under the touch of offence. Nothing, however, was more wonderful than what he sometimes would take for offence, unless it might be what he sometimes wouldn’t. He walked at

any rate on his toes now. “A very proper requirement of your Aunt Maud, my dear—I don’t hesitate to say it!” Yet as this, much as she had seen, left her silent at first from what might have been a sense of sickness, he had time to go on: “That’s her condition then. But what are her promises? Just what does she engage to do? You must work it, you know.”

“You mean make her feel,” Kate asked after a moment, “how much I’m attached to you?”

“Well, what a cruel invidious treaty it is for you to sign. I’m a poor ruin of an old dad to make a stand about giving up—I quite agree. But I’m not, after all, quite the old ruin not to get something *for* giving up.”

“Oh I think her idea,” said Kate almost gaily now, “is that I shall get a great deal.”

He met her with his inimitable amenity. “But does she give you the items?”

The girl went through the show. “More or less, I think. But many of them are things I dare say I may take for granted—things women can do for each other and that you wouldn’t understand.”

“There’s nothing I understand so well, always, as the things I needn’t! But what I want to do, you see,” he went on, “is to put it to your conscience that you’ve an admirable opportunity; and that it’s moreover one for which, after all, damn you, you’ve really to thank *me.”*

“I confess I don’t see,” Kate observed, “what my ‘conscience’ has to do with it.”

“Then, my dear girl, you ought simply to be ashamed of yourself. Do you know what you’re a proof of, all you hard hollow people together?” He put the question with a charming air of sudden spiritual heat. “Of the deplorably superficial morality of the age. The family sentiment, in our vulgarised brutalised life, has gone utterly to pot. There was a day when a man like me—by which I mean a parent like me—would have been for a daughter like you quite a distinct value; what’s called in the business world, I believe, an ‘asset.’ ”[4] He continued sociably to make it out. “I’m not talking only of what you might, with the right feeling, do *for* me, but of what you might—it’s what I call your opportunity—do *with* me. Unless indeed,” he the next moment imperturbably threw off, “they come a good deal to the same thing. Your duty as well as your chance, if you’re capable of seeing it, is to use me. Show family feeling by seeing what I’m good for. If you had it as I have it you’d see I’m still good—well, for a lot of things. There’s in fact, my dear,” Mr. Croy wound up, “a coach-and-four[e] to be got out of me.” His lapse, or rather his climax, failed a little of effect indeed through an undue precipitation of memory. Something his daughter had said came back to him. “You’ve settled to give away half your little inheritance?”

Her hesitation broke into laughter. “No—I haven’t ‘settled’ anything.”

“But you mean practically to let Marian collar it?” They stood there face to face, but she so denied herself to his challenge that he could only go on. “You’ve a view of three hundred a year for her in addition to what her husband left her with? Is *that,”* the remote progenitor of such wantonness audibly wondered, “your morality?”

Kate found her answer without trouble. “Is it your idea that I should give you everything?”

The “everything” clearly struck him—to the point even of determining the tone of his reply. “Far from it. How can you ask that when I refuse what you tell me you came to offer? Make of my idea what you can; I think I’ve sufficiently expressed it, and it’s at any rate to take or to leave. It’s the only one, I may nevertheless add; it’s the basket with all my eggs. It’s my conception, in short, of your duty.”

The girl’s tired smile watched the word as if it had taken on a small grotesque visibility. “You’re wonderful on such subjects! I think I should leave you in no doubt,” she pursued, “that if I were to sign my aunt’s agreement I should carry it out, in honour, to the letter.”

“Rather, my own love! It’s just your honour that I appeal to. The only way to play the game is to play it. There’s no limit to what your aunt can do for you.”

“Do you mean in the way of marrying me?”

“What else should I mean? Marry properly—”

“And then?” Kate asked as he hung fire.

“And then—well, I *will* talk with you. I’ll resume relations.”

She looked about her and picked up her parasol. “Because you’re not so afraid of any one else in the world as you are of *her*? My husband, if I should marry, would be at the worst less of a terror? If that’s what you mean there may be something in it. But doesn’t it depend a little also on what you mean by my getting a proper one? However,” Kate added as she picked out the frill of her little umbrella, “I don’t suppose your idea of him is *quite* that he should persuade you to live with us.”

“Dear no—not a bit.” He spoke as not resenting either the fear or the hope she imputed; met both imputations in fact with a sort of intellectual relief. “I place the case for you wholly in your aunt’s hands. I take her view with my eyes shut; I accept in all confidence any man she selects. If he’s good enough for *her*-elephantine snob as she is—he’s good enough for me; and quite in spite of the fact that she’ll be sure to select one who can be trusted to be nasty to me. My only interest is in your doing what she wants. You shan’t be so beastly poor, my darling,” Mr. Croy declared, “if I can help it.”

“Well then good-bye, papa,” the girl said after a reflexion on this that had perceptibly ended for her in a renunciation of further debate. “Of course you understand that it may be for long.”

Her companion had hereupon one of his finest inspirations. “Why not frankly for ever? You must do me the justice to see that I don’t do things, that I’ve never done them, by halves—that if I offer you to efface myself it’s for the final fatal sponge I ask, well saturated and well applied.”

She turned her handsome quiet face upon him at such length that it might indeed have been for the last time. “I don’t know what you’re like.”

“No more do I, my dear. I’ve spent my life in trying in vain to discover. Like nothing—mere’s the pity. If there had been many of us and we could have found each other out there’s no knowing what we mightn’t have done. But it doesn’t matter now. Good-bye, love.” He looked even not sure of what she would wish him to suppose on the subject of a kiss, yet also not embarrassed by his uncertainty.

She forbore in fact for a moment longer to clear it up. “I wish there were some one here who might serve—for any contingency—as a witness that I *have* put it to you that I’m ready to come.”

“Would you like me,” her father asked, “to call the landlady?”

“You may not believe me,” she pursued, “but I came really hoping you might have found some way. I’m very sorry at all events to leave you unwell.” He turned away from her on this and, as he had done before, took refuge, by the window, in a stare at the street. “Let me put it—unfortunately without a witness,” she added after a moment, “that there’s only one word you really need speak.”

When he took these words up it was still with his back to her. “If I don’t strike you as having already spoken it our time has been singularly wasted.”

“I’ll engage with you in respect to my aunt exactly to what she wants of me in respect to you. She wants me to choose. Very well, I will choose. I’ll wash my hands of her for you to just that tune.”

He at last brought himself round. “Do you know, dear, you make me sick? I’ve tried to be clear, and it isn’t fair.”

But she passed this over; she was too visibly sincere. “Father!”

“I don’t quite see what’s the matter with you,” he said, “and if you can’t pull yourself together I’ll—upon my honour—take you in hand. Put you into a cab and deliver you again safe at Lancaster Gale”[f]

She was really absent, distant. “Father.”

It was too much, and he met it sharply. “Well?”

“Strange as it may be to you to hear me say it, there’s a good you can do me and a help you can render.”

“Isn’t it then exactly what I’ve been trying to make yon feel?”

“Yes,” she answered patiently, “but so in the wrong way. I’m perfectly honest in what I say, and I know what I’m talking about, It isn’t that I’ll pretend I could have believed a month ago in anything to call aid or support from you. The case is changed—that’s what has happened; my difficulty is a new one. But even now it’s not a question of anything I should ask you in a way to ‘do.’ It’s simply a question of your not turning me away—taking yourself out of my life. II’s simply a question of your saying: ‘Yes then, since you will, we’ll stand together. We won’t worry in advance about how or where; we’ll have a faith and find a way.’ That’s all-*that* would be the good you’d do me. I should have you, and it would be for my benefit. Do you see?”

If he didn’t it wasn’t for want of looking at her hard. “The matter with you is that you’re in love, and that your aunt knows and—for reasons, I’m sure, perfect—hates and opposes it. Well she may! It’s a matter in which I trust her with my eyes shut. Go, please.” Though he spoke not in anger—rather in infinite sadness—he fairly turned her out. Before she took it up he had, as the fullest expression of what he felt, opened the door of the room. He had fairly, in his deep disapproval, a generous compassion to spare. “I’m sorry for her; deluded woman, if she builds on you.”

Kate stood a moment in the draught. “She’s not the person I pity most, for, deluded in many ways though she may be, she’s not the person who’s most so. I mean,” she explained, “if it’s a question of what you call

building on me."

He took it as if what she meant might be other than her description c)f it. "You're deceiving two persons then, Mrs. Lowder and somebody else?"

She shook her head with detachment. "I've no intention of that sort with respect to any one now—to Mrs. Lowder least of all. If you fail me"—she seemed to make it out for herself—"that has the merit at least that it simplifies. I shall go my way—as I see my way."

"Your way, you mean then, will be to marry some blackguard without a penny?"

"You demand a great deal of satisfaction," she observed, "for the little you give."

It brought him up again before her as with a sense that she was not to be hustled, and though he glared at her a little this had long been the practical limit to his general power of objection. "If you're base enough to incur your aunt's reprobation you're base enough for my argument. What, if you're not thinking of an utterly improper person, do your speeches to me signify? Who is the beggarly sneak?" he went on as her response failed.

Her response, when it came, was cold but distinct. "He has every disposition to make the best of you. He only wants in fact to be kind to you."

"Then he *must* be an ass! And how in the world can you consider it to improve him for me," her father pursued, "that he's also destitute and impossible? There are boobies and boobies even-the right and the wrong—and you appear to have carefully picked out one of the wrong. Your aunt knows *them,* by good fortune; I perfectly trust, as I tell you, her judgement for them; and you may take it from me once for all that I won't hear of any one of whom she won't." Which led up to his last word. "If you should really defy us both—!"

"Well, papa?"

"Well, my sweet child, I think that—reduced to insignificance as you may fondly believe me—I should still not be quite without some way of making you regret it."

She had a pause, a grave one, but not, as appeared, that she might measure this danger. "If I shouldn't do it, you know, it wouldn't be because I'm afraid of you."

"Oh if you don't do it," he retorted, "you may be as bold as you like!"

"Then you can do nothing at all for me?"

He showed her, this time unmistakeably—it was before her there on the landing, at the top of the tortuous stairs and in the midst of the strange smell that seemed to cling to them—how vain her appeal remained. "I've never pretended to do more than my duty; I've given you the best and the clearest advice." And then came up the spring that moved him. "If it only displeases you, you can go to Marian to be consoled." What he couldn't forgive was her dividing with Marian her scant share of the provision their mother had been able to leave them. She should have divided it with *him.*

—II—

She had gone to Mrs. Lowder on her mother's death—gone with an effort the strain and pain of which made her at present, as she recalled them, reflect on the long way she had travelled since then. There had been nothing else to do—not a penny in the other house, nothing but unpaid bills that had gathered thick while its mistress lay mortally ill, and the admonition that there was nothing she must attempt to raise money on, since everything belonged to the "estate." How the estate would turn out at best presented itself as a mystery altogether gruesome; it had proved in fact since then a residuum a trifle less scant than, with her sister, she had for some weeks feared; but the girl had had at the beginning rather a wounded sense of its being watched on behalf of Marian and her children. What on earth was it supposed that she wanted to do to it? She wanted in truth only to give up—to abandon her own interest, which she doubtless would already have done hadn't the point been subject to Aunt Maud's sharp intervention. Aunt Maud's intervention was all sharp now, and the other point, the great one, was that it was to be, in this light, either all put up with or all declined. Yet at the winter's end, nevertheless, she could scarce have said what stand she conceived she had taken. It wouldn't be the first time she had seen herself obliged to accept with smothered irony other people's interpretation of her conduct. She often ended by giving up to them—it seemed really the way to live—the version that met their convenience.

The tall rich heavy house at Lancaster Gate, on the other side of the Park and the long South Kensington

stretches, had figured to her, through childhood, through girlhood, as the remotest limit of her vague young world. It was further off and more occasional than anything else in the comparatively compact circle in which she revolved, and seemed, by a rigour early marked, to be reached through long, straight, discouraging vistas, perfect telescopes of streets, and which kept lengthening and straightening, whereas almost everything else in life was either at the worst roundabout Cromwell Road or at the furthest in the nearer parts of Kensington Gardens. Mrs. Lowder was her only "real" aunt, not the wife of an uncle, and had been thereby, both in ancient days and when the greater trouble came, the person, of all persons, properly to make some sign; in accord with which our young woman's feeling was founded on the impression, quite cherished for years, that the signs made across the interval just mentioned had never been really in the note of the situation. The main office of this relative for the young Croys—apart from giving them their fixed measure of social greatness—had struck them as being to form them to a conception of what they were not to expect. When Kate came to think matters over with wider knowledge, she failed quite to see how Aunt Maud could have been different—she had rather perceived by this time how many other things might have been; yet she also made out that if they had all consciously lived under a liability to the chill breath of *ultima Thule*[g] they couldn't, either, on the facts, very well have done less. What in the event appeared established was that if Mrs. Lowder had disliked them she yet hadn't disliked them so much as they supposed. It had at any rate been for the purpose of showing how she struggled with her aversion that she sometimes came to see them, that she at regular periods invited them to her house and in short, as it now looked, kept them along on the terms that would best give her sister the perennial luxury of a grievance. This sister, poor Mrs. Croy, the girl knew, had always judged her resentfully, and had brought them up, Marian, the boys and herself, to the idea of a particular attitude, for signs of the practice of which they watched each other with awe. The attitude was to make plain to Aunt Maud, with the same regularity as her invitations, that they sufficed—thanks awfully—to themselves. But the ground of it, Kate lived to discern, was that this was only because *she* didn't suffice to them. The little she offered was to be accepted under protest, yet not really because it was excessive. It wounded them—there was the rub!—because it fell short.

The number of new things our young lady looked out on from the high south window that hung over the Park—this number was so great (though some of the things were only old ones altered and, as the phrase was of other matters, done up) that life at present turned to her view from week to week more and more the face of a striking and distinguished stranger. She had reached a great age—for it quite seemed to her that at twenty-five it was late to reconsider, and her most general sense was a shade of regret that she hadn't known earlier. The world was different—whether for worse or for better—from her rudimentary readings, and it gave her the feeling of a wasted past. If she had only known sooner she might have arranged herself more to meet it. She made at all events discoveries every day, some of which were about herself and others about other persons. Two of these—one under each head—more particularly engaged, in alternation, her anxiety. She saw as she had never seen before how material things spoke to her. She saw, and she blushed to see, that if in contrast with some of its old aspects life now affected her as a dress successfully "done up," this was exactly by reason of the trimmings and lace, was a matter of ribbons and silk and velvet. She had a dire accessibility to pleasure from such sources. She liked the charming quarters her aunt had assigned her—liked them literally more than she had in all her other days liked anything; and nothing could have been more uneasy than her suspicion of her relative's view of this truth. Her relative was prodigious—she had never done her relative justice. These larger conditions all tasted of her, from morning till night; but she was a person in respect to whom the growth of acquaintance could only—strange as it might seem—keep your heart in your mouth.

The girl's second great discovery was that, so far from having been for Mrs. Lowder a subject of superficial consideration, the blighted home in Lexham Gardens had haunted her nights and her days. Kate had spent, all winter, hours of observation that were not less pointed for being spent alone; recent events, which her mourning explained, assured her a measure of isolation, and it was in the isolation above all that her neighbour's influence worked. Sitting far downstairs Aunt Maud was yet a presence from which a sensitive niece could feel herself extremely under pressure. She knew herself now, the sensitive niece, as having been marked from far back. She knew more than she could have told you, by the upstairs fire, in a whole dark December afternoon. She knew so much that her knowledge was what fairly kept her there, making her at times circulate more endlessly between the small silk-covered sofa that stood for her in the firelight and the great grey map of Middlesex spread beneath her lookout. To go down, to forsake her refuge, was to meet some of her discoveries halfway, to have to face them or fly before them; whereas they were at such a height only like the rumble of a far-off siege heard in the provisioned citadel. She had almost liked, in these weeks, what had created her suspense and her stress: the loss of her mother, the submersion of her father, the discomfort of her sister, and confirmation of their shrunken prospects, the certainty, in especial, of her having to recognise that should she behave, as she called it, decently—that is still do something for others—she would be herself wholly without supplies. She held that she had a right to sadness and stillness; she nursed them for their postponing power. What they mainly postponed was the question of a surrender, though she couldn't yet have said exactly of what: a general surrender of everything—that was at moments the way it presented itself—to Aunt Maud's looming "personality." It was by her personality that Aunt Maud was prodigious, and the great

mass of it loomed because, in the thick, the foglike air of her arranged existence, there were parts doubtless magnified and parts certainly vague. They represented at all events alike, the dim and the distinct, a strong will and a high hand. It was perfectly present to Kate that she might be devoured, and she compared herself to a trembling kid, kept apart a day or two till her turn should come, but sure sooner or later to be introduced into the cage of the lioness.

The cage was Aunt Maud's own room, her office, her counting-house, her battlefield, her especial scene, in fine, of action, situated on the ground-floor, opening from the main hall and figuring rather to our young woman on exit and entrance as a guard-house or a toll-gate. The lioness waited—the kid had at least that consciousness; was aware of the neighbourhood of a morsel she had reason to suppose tender. She would have been meanwhile a wonderful lioness for a show, an extraordinary figure in a cage or anywhere; majestic, magnificent, high-coloured, all brilliant gloss, perpetual satin, twinkling bugles and flashing gems, with a lustre of agate eyes, a sheen of raven hair, a polish of complexion that was like that of well-kept china and that—as if the skin were too tight—told especially at curves and corners. Her niece had a quiet name for her—she kept it quiet: thinking of her, with a free fancy, as somehow typically insular, she talked to herself of Britannia of the Market Place—Britannia unmistakeable but with a pen on her ear—and felt she should not be happy till she might on some occasion add to the rest of the panoply a helmet, a shield, a trident and a ledger. It wasn't in truth, however, that the forces with which, as Kate felt, she would have to deal were those most suggested by an image simple and broad; she was learning after all each day to know her companion, and what she had already most perceived was the mistake of trusting to easy analogies. There was a whole side of Britannia, the side of her florid philistinism, her plumes and her train, her fantastic furniture and heaving bosom, the false gods of her taste and false notes of her talk, the sole contemplation of which would be dangerously misleading. She was a complex and subtle Britannia, as passionate as she was practical, with a reticule for her prejudices as deep as that other pocket, the pocket full of coins stamped in her image, that the world best knew her by. She carried on in short, behind her aggressive and defensive front, operations determined by her wisdom. It was in fact as a besieger, we have hinted, that our young lady, in the provisioned citadel, had for the present most to think of her, and what made her formidable in this character was that she was unscrupulous and immoral. So at all events in silent sessions and a youthful off-hand way Kate conveniently pictured her: what this sufficiently represented being that her weight was in the scale of certain dangers—those dangers that, by our showing, made the younger woman linger and lurk above, while the elder, below, both militant and diplomatic, covered as much of the ground as possible. Yet what were the dangers, after all, but just the dangers of life and of London? Mrs. Lowder *was* London, *was* life—the roar of the siege and the thick of the fray. There were some things, after all, of which Britannia was afraid; but Aunt Maud was afraid of nothing—not even, it would appear, of arduous thought.

These impressions, none the less, Kate kept so much to herself that she scarce shared them with poor Marian, the ostensible purpose of her frequent visits to whom yet continued to be to talk over everything. One of her reasons for holding off from the last concession to Aunt Maud was that she might be the more free to commit herself to this so much nearer and so much less fortunate relative, with whom Aunt Maud would have almost nothing direct to do. The sharpest pinch of her state, meanwhile, was exactly that all intercourse with her sister had the effect of casting down her courage and tying her hands, adding daily to her sense of the part, not always either uplifting or sweetening, that the bond of blood might play in one's life. She was face to face with it now, with the bond of blood; the consciousness of it was what she seemed most clearly to have "come into" by the death of her mother, much of that consciousness as her mother had absorbed and carried away. Her haunting harassing father, her menacing uncompromising aunt, her portionless little nephews and nieces, were figures that caused the chord of natural piety superabundantly to vibrate. Her manner of putting it to herself—but more especially in respect to Marian—was that she saw what you might be brought to by the cultivation of consanguinity. She had taken, in the old days, as she supposed, the measure of this liability; those being the days when, as the second-born, she had thought no one in the world so pretty as Marian, no one so charming, so clever, so assured in advance of happiness and success. The view was different now, but her attitude had been obliged, for many reasons, to show as the same. The subject of this estimate was no longer pretty, as the reason for thinking her clever was no longer plain; yet, bereaved, disappointed, demoralised, querulous, she was all the more sharply and insistently Kate's elder and Kate's own. Kate's most constant feeling about her was that she would make her, Kate, do things; and always, in comfortless Chelsea, at the door of the small house the small rent of which she couldn't help having on her mind, she fatalistically asked herself, before going in, which thing it would probably be this time. She noticed with profundity that disappointment made people selfish; she marvelled at the serenity—it was the poor woman's only one—of what Marian took for granted: her own state of abasement as the second-born, her life reduced to mere inexhaustible sisterhood. She existed in that view wholly for the small house in Chelsea; the moral of which moreover, of course, was that the more you gave yourself the less of you was left. There were always people to snatch at you, and it would never occur to *them* that they were eating you up. They did that without tasting.

There was no such misfortune, or at any rate no such discomfort, she further reasoned, as to be formed at

once for being and for seeing. You always saw, in this case something else than what you were, and you got in consequence none of the peace of your condition. However, as she never really let Marian see what she was Marian might well not have been aware that she herself saw. Kate was accordingly to her own vision not a hypocrite of virtue, for she gave herself up; but she was a hypocrite of stupidity, for she kept to herself everything that was not herself. What she most kept was the particular sentiment with which she watched her sister instinctively neglect nothing that would make for her submission to their aunt; a state of the spirit that perhaps marked most sharply how poor you might become when you minded so much the absence of wealth. It was through Kate that Aunt Maud should be worked, and nothing mattered less than what might become of Kate in the process. Kate was to burn her ships in short, so that Marian should profit; and Marian's desire to profit was quite oblivious of a dignity that had after all its reasons—if it had only understood them—for keeping itself a little stiff. Kate, to be properly stiff for both of them, would therefore have had to be selfish, have had to prefer an ideal of behaviour—than which nothing ever was more selfish—to the possibility of stray crumbs for the four small creatures. The tale of Mrs. Lowder's disgust at her elder niece's marriage to Mr. Condrip had lost little of its point; the incredibly fatuous behaviour of Mr. Condrip, the parson of a dull suburban parish, with a saintly profile which was always in evidence, being so distinctly on record to keep criticism consistent. He had presented his profile on system, having, goodness knew, nothing else to present-nothing at all to full-face the world with, no imagination of the propriety of living and minding his business. Criticism had remained on Aunt Maud's part consistent enough; she was not a person to regard such proceedings as less of a mistake for having acquired more of the privilege of pathos. She hadn't been forgiving, and the only approach she made to overlooking them was by overlooking—with the surviving delinquent—the solid little phalanx that now represented them. Of the two sinister ceremonies that she lumped together, the marriage and the interment, she had been present at the former, just as she had sent Marian before it a liberal cheque; but this had not been for her more than the shadow of an admitted link with Mrs. Condrip's course. She disapproved of clamorous children for whom there was no prospect; she disapproved of weeping widows who couldn't make their errors good; and she had thus put within Marian's reach one of the few luxuries left when so much else had gone, an easy pretext for a constant grievance. Kate Croy remembered well what their mother, in a different quarter, had made of it; and it was Marian's marked failure to pluck the fruit of resentment that committed them as sisters to an almost equal fellowship in abjection. If the theory was that, yes, alas, one of the pair had ceased to be noticed, but that the other was noticed enough to make up for it, who would fail to see that Kate couldn't separate herself without a cruel pride? That lesson became sharp for our young lady the day after her interview with her father.

"I can't imagine," Marian on this occasion said to her, "how you can think of anything else in the world but the horrid way we're situated."

"And, pray, how do you know," Kate enquired in reply, "anything about my thoughts? It seems to me I give you sufficient proof of how much I think of you. I don't really, my dear, know what else you've to do with!"

Marian's retort on this was a stroke as to which she had supplied herself with several kinds of preparation, but there was none the less something of an unexpected note in its promptitude. She had foreseen her sister's general fear; but here, ominously, was the special one. "Well, your own business is of course your own business, and you may say there's no one less in a position than I to preach to you. But, all the same, if you wash your hands of me for ever in consequence, I won't, for this once, keep back that I don't consider you've a right, as we all stand, to throw yourself away."

It was after the children's dinner, which was also their mother's, but which their aunt mostly contrived to keep from ever becoming her own luncheon; and the two young women were still in the presence of the crumbled table-cloth, the dispersed pinafores, the scraped dishes, the lingering odour of boiled food. Kate had asked with ceremony if she might put up a window a little, and Mrs. Condrip had replied without it that she might do as she liked. She often received such enquiries as if they reflected in a manner on the pure essence of her little ones. The four had retired, with much movement and noise, under imperfect control of the small Irish governess whom their aunt had hunted up for them and whose brooding resolve not to prolong so uncrowned a martyrdom she already more than suspected. Their mother had become for Kate—who took it just for the effect of being their mother—quite a different thing from the mild Marian of the past: Mr. Condrip's widow expansively obscured that image. She was little more than a ragged relic, a plain prosaic result of him—as if she had somehow been pulled through him as through an obstinate funnel, only to be left crumpled and useless and with nothing in her but what he accounted for. She had grown red and almost fat, which were not happy signs of mourning; less and less like any Croy, particularly a Croy in trouble, and sensibly like her husband's two unmarried sisters, who came to see her, in Kate's view, much too often and stayed too long, with the consequence of inroads upon the tea and bread-and-butter—matters as to which Kate, not unconcerned with the tradesmen's books, had feelings. About them moreover Marian *was* touchy, and her nearer relative, who observed and weighed things, noted as an oddity that she would have taken any reflexion on them as a reflexion on herself. If that was what marriage necessarily did to you Kate Croy would have questioned marriage. It was at any rate a grave example of what a man—and such a man!—might make

of a woman. She could see how the Condrip pair pressed their brother's widow on the subject of Aunt Maud—who wasn't, after all, *their* aunt; made her, over their interminable cups, chatter and even swagger about Lancaster Gate, made her more vulgar than it had seemed written that any Croy could possibly become on such a subject. They laid it down, they rubbed it in, that Lancaster Gate was to be kept in sight, and that she, Kate, was to keep it; so that, curiously, or at all events sadly, our young woman was sure of being in her own person more permitted to them as an object of comment than they would in turn ever be permitted to herself. The beauty of which too was that Marian didn't love them. But they were Condrips—they had grown near the rose; they were almost like Bertie and Maudie, like Kitty and Guy. They talked of the dead to her, which Kate never did; it being a relation in which Kate could but mutely listen. She couldn't indeed too often say to herself that if that was what marriage did to you—! It may easily be guessed therefore that the ironic light of such reserves fell straight across the field of Marian's warning. "I don't quite see," she answered, "where in particular it strikes you that my danger lies. I'm not conscious, I assure you, of the least disposition to 'throw' myself anywhere. I feel that for the present I've been quite sufficiently thrown."

"You don't feel"—Marian brought it all out—"that you'd like to marry Merton Densher?"

Kate took a moment to meet this enquiry. "Is it your idea that if I should feel so I would be bound to give you notice, so that you might step in and head me off? Is that your idea?" the girl asked. Then as her sister also had a pause, "I don't know what makes you talk of Mr. Densher," she observed.

"I talk of him just because you don't. That you never do, in spite of what I know—that's what makes me think of him. Or rather perhaps it's what makes me think of *you.* If you don't know by this time what I hope for you, what I dream of—my attachment being what it is—it's no use my attempting to tell you." But Marian had in fact warmed to her work, and Kate was sure she had discussed Mr. Densher with the Miss Condrips. "If I name that person I suppose it's because I'm so afraid of him. If you want really to know, he fills me with terror. If you want really to know, in fact, I dislike him as much as I dread him."

"And yet don't think it dangerous to abuse him to me?"

"Yes," Mrs. Condrip confessed, "I do think it dangerous; but how can I speak of him otherwise? I dare say, I admit, that I shouldn't speak of him at all. Only I do want you for once, as I said just now, to know."

"To know what, my dear?"

"That I should regard it," Marian promptly returned, "as far and away the worst thing that has happened to us yet."

"Do you mean because he hasn't money?"

"Yes, for one thing. And because I don't believe in him."

Kate was civil but mechanical. "What do you mean by not believing in him?"

"Well, being sure he'll never get it. And you must have it. You *shall* have it."

"To give it to you?"

Marian met her with a readiness that was practically pert. "To *have* it, first. Not at any rate to go on not having it. Then we should see."

"We should indeed!" said Kate Croy. It was talk of a kind she loathed, but if Marian chose to be vulgar what was one to do? It made her think of the Miss Condrips with renewed aversion. "I like the way you arrange things—I like what you take for granted. If it's so easy for us to marry men who want us to scatter gold, I wonder we any of us do anything else. I don't see so many of them about, nor what interest I might ever have for them. You live, my dear," she presently added, "in a world of vain thoughts."

"Not so much as you, Kate; for I see what I see and you can't turn it off that way." The elder sister paused long enough for the younger's face to show, in spite of superiority, an apprehension. "I'm not talking of any man but Aunt Maud's man, nor of any money even, if you like, but Aunt Maud's money. I'm not talking of anything but your doing what *she* wants. You're wrong if you speak of anything that I want of you; I want nothing but what she does. That's good enough for me!"—and Marian's tone struck her companion as of the lowest. "If I don't believe in Merton Densher I do at least in Mrs. Lowder."

"Your ideas are the more striking," Kate returned, "that they're the same as papa's. I had them from him, you'll be interested to know—and with all the brilliancy you may imagine—yesterday."

Marian clearly was interested to know. "He has been to see you?"

"No, I went to him."

"Really?" Marian wondered. "For what purpose?"

"To tell him I'm ready to go to him."

Marian stared. "To leave Aunt Maud—?"

"For my father, yes."

She had fairly flushed, poor Mrs. Condrip, with horror. "You're ready—?"

"So I told him. I couldn't tell him less."

"And pray could you tell him more?" Marian gasped in her distress. "What in the world is he to us? You bring out such a thing as that this way?"

They faced each other—the tears were in Marian's eyes. Kate watched them there a moment and then said: "I had thought it well over—over and over. But you needn't feel injured. I'm not going. He won't have me."

Her companion still panted—it took time to subside. "Well, *I* wouldn't have you—wouldn't receive you at all, I can assure you—if he had made you any other answer. I do feel injured—at your having been willing. If you were to go to papa, my dear, you'd have to stop coming to me." Marian put it thus, indefinably, as a picture of privation from which her companion might shrink. Such were the threats she could complacently make, could think herself masterful for making. "But if he won't take you," she continued, "he shows at least his sharpness."

Marian had always her views of sharpness; she was, as her sister privately commented, great on that resource. But Kate had her refuge from irritation. "He won't take me," she simply repeated. "But he believes, like you, in Aunt Maud. He threatens me with his curse if I leave her."

"So you *won't?"* As the girl at first said nothing her companion caught at it. "You won't, of course? I see you won't. But I don't see why, conveniently, I shouldn't insist to you once for all on the plain truth of the whole matter. The truth, my dear, of your duty. Do you ever think about *that?* It's the greatest duty of all."

"There you are again," Kate laughed. "Papa's also immense on my duty."

"Oh I don't pretend to be immense, but I pretend to know more than you do of life; more even perhaps than papa." Marian seemed to see that personage at this moment, nevertheless, in the light of a kinder irony. "Poor old papa!"

She sighed it with as many condonations as her sister's ear had more than once caught in her "Dear old Aunt Maud!" These were things that made Kate turn for the time sharply away, and she gathered herself now to go. They were the note again of the abject; it was hard to say which of the persons in question had most shown how little they liked her. The younger woman proposed at any rate to let discussion rest, and she believed that, for herself, she had done so during the ten minutes elapsing, thanks to her wish not to break off short, before she could gracefully withdraw. It then appeared, however, that Marian had been discussing still, and there was something that at the last Kate had to take up. "Whom do you mean by Aunt Maud's young man?"

"Whom should I mean but Lord Mark?"

"And where do you pick up such vulgar twaddle?" Kate demanded with her clear face. "How does such stuff, in this hole, get to you?"

She had no sooner spoken than she asked herself what had become of the grace to which she had sacrificed. Marian certainly did little to save it, and nothing indeed was so inconsequent as her ground of complaint. She desired her to "work" Lancaster Gate as she believed that scene of abundance could be worked; but she now didn't see why advantage should be taken of the bloated connexion to put an affront on her own poor home. She appeared In fact for the moment to take the position that Kate kept her in her "hole" and then heartlessly reflected on her being in it. Yet she didn't explain how she had picked up the report on which her sister had challenged her—so that it was thus left to her sister to see in it once more a sign of the creeping curiosity of the Miss Condrips. They lived in a deeper hole than Marian, but they kept their ear to the ground, they spent their days in prowling, whereas Marian, in garments and shoes that seemed steadily to grow looser and larger, never prowled. There were times when Kate wondered if the Miss Condrips were offered her by fate as a warning for her own future—to be taken as showing her what she herself might become at forty if she let things too recklessly go. What was expected of her by others—and by so many of them—could, all the same, on occasion, present itself as beyond a joke; and this was just now the aspect it particularly wore. She was not only to quarrel with Merton Densher for the pleasure of her five spectators—with the Miss Condrips there were five; she was to set forth in pursuit of Lord Mark on some preposterous theory of the premium attached to success. Mrs. Lowder's hand had hung out the premium, and it figured at the end of the course as a bell that would ring, break out into public clamour, as soon as touched. Kate reflected sharply enough on the weak points of this fond fiction, with the result at last of a certain chill for her

sister's confidence; though Mrs. Condrip still took refuge in the plea—which was after all the great point—that their aunt would be munificent when their aunt should be content. The exact identity of her candidate was a detail; what was of the essence was her conception of the kind of match it was open to her niece to make with her aid. Marian always spoke of marriages as "matches," but that was again a detail. Mrs. Lowder's "aid" meanwhile awaited them—if not to light the way to Lord Mark, then to somebody better. Marian would put up, in fine, with somebody better; she only wouldn't put up with somebody so much worse. Kate had once more to go through all this before a graceful issue was reached. It was reached by her paying with the sacrifice of Mr. Densher for her reduction of Lord Mark to the absurd. So they separated softly enough. She was to be let off hearing about Lord Mark so long as she made it good that she wasn't underhand about any one else. She had denied everything and every one, she reflected as she went away—and that was a relief; but it also made rather a clean sweep of the future. The prospect put on a bareness that already gave her something in common with the Miss Condrips.

BOOK SECOND

—I—

Merton Densher, who passed the best hours of each night at the office of his newspaper, had at times, during the day, to make up for it, a sense, or at least an appearance, of leisure, in accordance with which he was not infrequently to be met in different parts of the town at moments when men of business are hidden from the public eye. More than once during the present winter's end[5] he had deviated toward three o'clock, or toward four, into Kensington Gardens, where he might for a while, on each occasion, have been observed to demean himself as a person with nothing to do. He made his way indeed, for the most part, with a certain directness over to the north side; but once that ground was reached his behaviour was noticeably wanting in point. He moved, seemingly at random, from alley to alley; he stopped for no reason and remained idly agaze; he sat down in a chair and then changed to a bench; after which he walked about again, only again to repeat both the vagueness and the vivacity. Distinctly he was a man either with nothing at all to do or with ever so much to think about; and it was not to be denied that the impression he might often thus easily make had the effect of causing the burden of proof in certain directions to rest on him. It was a little the fault of his aspect, his personal marks, which made it almost impossible to name his profession.

He was a longish, leanish, fairish young Englishman, not un-amenable, on certain sides, to classification—as for instance by being a gentleman, by being rather specifically one of the educated, one of the generally sound and generally civil; yet, though to that degree neither extraordinary nor abnormal, he would have failed to play straight into an observer's hands. He was young for the House of Commons, he was loose for the Army. He was refined, as might have been said, for the City and, quite apart from the cut of his cloth, sceptical, it might have been felt, for the Church. On the other hand he was credulous for diplomacy, or perhaps even for science, while he was perhaps at the same time too much in his mere senses for poetry and yet too little in them for art. You would have got fairly near him by making out in his eyes the potential recognition of ideas; but you would have quite fallen away again on the question of the ideas themselves. The difficulty with Densher was that he looked vague without looking weak—idle without looking empty. It was the accident, possibly, of his long legs, which were apt to stretch themselves; of his straight hair and his well-shaped head, never, the latter, neatly smooth, and apt into the bargain, at the time of quite other calls upon it, to throw itself suddenly back and, supported behind by his uplifted arms and interlocked hands, place him for unconscionable periods in communion with the ceiling, the tree-tops, the sky. He was in short visibly absentminded, irregularly clever, liable to drop what was near and to take up what was far; he was more a prompt critic than a prompt follower of custom. He suggested above all, however, that wondrous state of youth in which the elements, the metals more or less precious, are so in fusion and fermentation that the question of the final stamp, the pressure that fixes the value, must wait for comparative coolness. And it was a mark of his interesting mixture that if he was irritable it was by a law of considerable subtlety—a law that in intercourse with him it might be of profit, though not easy, to master. One of the effects of it was that he had for you surprises of tolerance as well as of temper.

He loitered, on the best of the relenting days, the several occasions we speak of, along the part of the Gardens nearest to Lancaster Gate, and when, always, in due time, Kate Croy came out of her aunt's house, crossed the road and arrived by the nearest entrance, there was a general publicity in the proceeding which made it slightly anomalous. If their meeting was to be bold and free it might have taken place within-doors; if it was to be shy or secret it might have taken place almost anywhere better than under Mrs. Lowder's windows. They failed indeed to remain attached to that spot; they wandered and strolled, taking in the course of more than one of these interviews a considerable walk, or else picked out a couple of chairs under one of the great trees and sat as much apart—apart from every one else—as possible. But Kate had each time, at first, the air of wishing to expose herself to pursuit and capture if those things were in question. She made the point that she wasn't underhand, any more than she was vulgar; that the Gardens were charming in themselves and this use of them a matter of taste; and that, if her aunt chose to glare at her from the drawing-room or to cause her to be tracked and overtaken, she could at least make it convenient that this should be easily done. The fact was that the relation between these young persons abounded in such oddities as were not inaptly symbolised by assignations that had a good deal more appearance than motive. Of the strength of the tie that held them we shall sufficiently take the measure; but it was meanwhile almost obvious that if the great possibility had come up for them it had done so, to an exceptional degree, under the protection of the famous

law of contraries. Any deep harmony that might eventually govern them would not be the result of their having much in common -having anything in fact but their affection; and would really find its explanation in some sense, on the part of each, of being poor where the other was rich. It is nothing new indeed that generous young persons often admire most what nature hasn't given them—from which it would appear, after all, that our friends were both generous.

Merton Densher had repeatedly said to himself—and from far back—that he should be a fool not to marry a woman whose value would be in her differences; and Kate Croy, though without having quite so philosophised, had quickly recognised in the young man a precious unlikeness. He represented what her life had never given her and certainly, without some such aid as his, never would give her; all the high dim things she lumped together as of the mind.[6] It was on the side of the mind that Densher was rich for her and mysterious and strong; and he had rendered her in especial the sovereign service of making that element real. She had had all her days to take it terribly on trust, no creature she had ever encountered having been able to testify for it directly. Vague rumours of its existence had made their precarious way to her; but nothing had, on the whole, struck her as more likely than that she should live and die without the chance to verify them. The chance had come—it was an extraordinary one—on the day she first met Densher; and it was to the girl's lasting honour that she knew on the spot what she was in presence of. That occasion indeed, for everything that straightway flowered in it, would be worthy of high commemoration; Densher's perception went out to meet the young woman's and quite kept pace with her own recognition. Having so often concluded on the fact of his weakness, as he called it, for life—his strength merely for thought—life, he logically opined, was what he must somehow arrange to annex and possess. This was so much a necessity that thought by itself only went on in the void; it was from the immediate air of life that it must draw its breath. So the young man, ingenious but large, critical but ardent too, made out both his case and Kate Croy's. They had originally met before her mother's death—an occasion marked for her as the last pleasure permitted by the approach of that event; after which the dark months had interposed a screen and, for all Kate knew, made the end one with the beginning.

The beginning—to which she often went back—had been a scene, for our young woman, of supreme brilliancy; a party given at a "gallery" hired by a hostess who fished with big nets. A Spanish dancer, understood to be at that moment the delight of the town, an American reciter, the joy of a kindred people, an Hungarian fiddler, the wonder of the world at large—in the name of these and other attractions the company in which Kate, by a rare privilege, found herself had been freely convoked. She lived under her mother's roof, as she considered, obscurely, and was acquainted with few persons who entertained on that scale; but she had had dealings with two or three connected, as appeared, with such—two or three through whom the stream of hospitality, filtered or diffused, could thus now and then spread to outlying receptacles. A good-natured lady in fine, a friend of her mother and a relative of the lady of the gallery, had offered to take her to the party in question and had there fortified her, further, with two or three of those introductions that, at large parties, lead to other things—that had at any rate on this occasion culminated for her in conversation with a tall fair, a slightly unbrushed and rather awkward, but on the whole a not dreary, young man. The young man had affected her as detached, as—it was indeed what he called himself—awfully at sea, as much more distinct from what surrounded them than any one else appeared to be, and even as probably quite disposed to be making his escape when pulled up to be placed in relation with her. He gave her his word for it indeed, this same evening, that only their meeting had prevented his flight, but that now he saw how sorry he should have been to miss it. This point they had reached by midnight, and though for the value of such remarks everything was in the tone, by midnight the tone was there too. She had had originally her full apprehension of his coerced, certainly of his vague, condition—full apprehensions often being with her immediate; then she had had her equal consciousness that within five minutes something between them had—well, she couldn't call it anything but *come*. It was nothing to look at or to handle, but was somehow everything to feel and to know; it was that something for each of them had happened.

They had found themselves regarding each other straight, and for a longer time on end than was usual even at parties in galleries; but that in itself after all would have been a small affair for two such handsome persons. It wasn't, in a word, simply that their eyes had met; other conscious organs, faculties, feelers had met as well, and when Kate afterwards imaged to herself the sharp deep fact she saw it, in the oddest way, as a particular performance. She had observed a ladder against a garden-wall and had trusted herself so to climb it as to be able to see over into the probable garden on the other side. On reaching the top she had found herself face to face with a gentleman engaged in a like calculation at the same moment, and the two enquirers had remained confronted on their ladders. The great point was that for the rest of that evening they had been perched—they had not climbed down; and indeed during the time that followed Kate at least had had the perched feeling—it was as if she were there aloft without a retreat. A simpler expression of all this is doubtless but that they had taken each other in with interest; and without a happy hazard six months later the incident would have closed in that account of it. The accident meanwhile had been as natural as anything in London ever is: Kate had one afternoon found herself opposite Mr. Densher on the Underground Railway. She had entered the train at Sloane Square to go to Queen's Road, and the carriage in which she took her place was all but full. Densher was already in it—on the other bench and at the furthest angle; she was sure of him before

they had again started. The day and the hour were darkness, there were six other persons and she had been busy seating herself; but her consciousness had gone to him as straight as if they had come together in some bright stretch of a desert. They had on neither part a second's hesitation; they looked across the choked compartment exactly as if she had known he would be there and he had expected her to come in; so that, though in the conditions they could only exchange the greeting of movements, smiles, abstentions, it would have been quite in the key of these passages that they should have alighted for ease at the very next station. Kate was in fact sure the very next station was the young man's true goal—which made it clear he was going on only from the wish to speak to her. He had to go on, for this purpose, to High Street Kensington, as it was not till then that the exit of a passenger gave him his chance.

His chance put him however in quick possession of the seat facing her, the alertness of his capture of which seemed to show her his impatience. It helped them moreover, with strangers on either side, little to talk; though this very restriction perhaps made such a mark for them as nothing else could have done. If the fact that their opportunity had again come round for them could be so intensely expressed without a word, they might very well feel on the spot that it had not come round for nothing. The extraordinary part of the matter was that they were not in the least meeting where they had left off, but ever so much further on, and that these added links added still another between High Street and Notting Hill Gate, and then worked between the latter station and Queen's Road an extension really inordinate. At Notting Hill Gate Kate's right-hand neighbour descended, whereupon Densher popped straight into that seat; only there was not much gained when a lady the next instant popped into Densher's. He could say almost nothing—Kate scarce knew, at least, what he said; she was so occupied with a certainty that one of the persons opposite, a youngish man with a single eye-glass which he kept constantly in position, had made her out from the first as visibly, as strangely affected. If such a person made her out what then did Densher do?—a question in truth sufficiently answered when, on their reaching her station, he instantly followed her out of the train. That had been the real beginning—the beginning of everything else; the other time, the time at the party, had been but the beginning of *that*. Never in life before had she so let herself go; for always before—so far as small adventures could have been in question for her—there had been, by the vulgar measure, more to go upon. He had walked with her to Lancaster Gate, and then she had walked with him away from it—for all the world, she said to herself, like the housemaid giggling to the baker.

This appearance, she was afterwards to feel, had been all in order for a relation that might precisely best be described in the terms of the baker and the housemaid. She could say to herself that from that hour they had kept company: that had come to represent, technically speaking, alike the range and the limit of their tie. He had on the spot, naturally, asked leave to call upon her—which, as a young person who wasn't really young, who didn't pretend to be a sheltered flower, she as rationally gave. That—she was promptly clear about it—was now her only possible basis; she was just the contemporary London female, highly modern, inevitably battered, honourably free. She had of course taken her aunt straight into her confidence—had gone through the form of asking her leave; and she subsequently remembered that though on this occasion she had left the history of her new alliance as scant as the facts themselves, Mrs. Lowder had struck her at the time as surprisingly mild. The occasion had been in every way full of the reminder that her hostess was deep: it was definitely then that she had begun to ask herself what Aunt Maud was, in vulgar parlance, "up to." "You may receive, my dear, whom you like"—that was what Aunt Maud, who in general objected to people's doing as they liked, had replied; and it bore, this unexpectedness, a good deal of looking into. There were many explanations, and they were all amusing—amusing, that is, in the line of the sombre and brooding amusement cultivated by Kate in her actual high retreat. Merton Densher came the very next Sunday; but Mrs. Lowder was so consistently magnanimous as to make it possible to her niece to see him alone. She saw him, however, on the Sunday following, in order to invite him to dinner; and when, after dining, he came again—which he did three times, she found means to treat his visit as preponderantly to herself. Kate's conviction that she didn't like him made that remarkable; it added to the evidence, by this time voluminous, that she was remarkable all round. If she had been, in the way of energy, merely usual she would have kept her dislike direct; whereas it was now as if she were seeking to know him in order to see best where to "have" him. That was one of the reflexions made in our young woman's high retreat; she smiled from her lookout, in the silence that was only the fact of hearing irrelevant sounds, as she caught the truth that you could easily accept people when you wanted them so to be delivered to you. When Aunt Maud wished them dispatched it was not to be done by deputy; it was clearly always a matter reserved for her own hand.

But what made the girl wonder most was the implication of so much diplomacy in respect to her own value. What view might she take of her position in the light of this appearance that her companion feared so as yet to upset her? It was as if Densher were accepted partly under the dread that if he hadn't been she would act in resentment. Hadn't her aunt considered the danger that she would in that case have broken off, have seceded? The danger was exaggerated—she would have done nothing so gross; but that, it would seem, was the way Mrs. Lowder saw her and believed her to be reckoned with. What importance therefore did she really attach to her, what strange interest could she take in their keeping on terms? Her father and her sister had their answer to this—even without knowing how the question struck her: they saw the lady of Lancaster Gate

as panting to make her fortune, and the explanation of that appetite was that, on the accident of a nearer view than she had before enjoyed, she had been charmed, been dazzled. They approved, they admired in her one of the belated fancies of rich capricious violent old women—the more marked moreover because the result of no plot; and they piled up the possible fruits for the person concerned. Kate knew what to think of her own power thus to carry by storm; she saw herself as handsome, no doubt, but as hard, and felt herself as clever but as cold; and as so much too imperfectly ambitious, furthermore, that it was a pity, for a quiet life, she couldn't decide to be either finely or stupidly indifferent. Her intelligence sometimes kept her still—too still—but her want of it was restless; so that she got the good, it seemed to her, of neither extreme. She saw herself at present, none the less, in a situation, and even her sad disillusioned mother, dying, but with Aunt Maud interviewing the nurse on the stairs, had not failed to remind her that it was of the essence of situations to be, under Providence, worked. The dear woman had died in the belief that she was actually working the one then recognised.

Kate took one of her walks with Densher just after her visit to Mr. Croy; but most of it went, as usual, to their sitting in talk. They had under the trees by the lake the air of old friends—particular phases of apparent earnestness in which they might have been settling every question in their vast young world; and periods of silence, side by side, perhaps even more, when "A long engagement!" would have been the final reading of the signs on the part of a passer struck with them, as it was so easy to be. They would have presented themselves thus as very old friends rather than as young persons who had met for the first time but a year before and had spent most of the interval without contact. It was indeed for each, already, as if they were older friends; and though the succession of their meetings might, between them, have been straightened out, they only had a confused sense of a good many, very much alike, and a confused intention of a good many more, as little different as possible. The desire to keep them just as they were had perhaps to do with the fact that in spite of the presumed diagnosis of the stranger there had been for them as yet no formal, no final understanding. Densher had at the very first pressed the question, but that, it had been easy to reply, was too soon; so that a singular thing had afterwards happened. They had accepted their acquaintance as too short for an engagement, but they had treated it as long enough for almost anything else, and marriage was somehow before them like a temple without an avenue. They belonged to the temple and they met in the grounds; they were in the stage at which grounds in general offered much scattered refreshment. But Kate had meanwhile had so few confidants that she wondered at the source of her father's suspicions. The diffusion of rumour was of course always remarkable in London, and for Marian not less—as Aunt Maud touched neither directly—the mystery had worked. No doubt she had been seen. Of course she had been seen. She had taken no trouble not to be seen, and it was a thing she was clearly incapable of taking. But she had been seen how?—and what was there to see? She was in love—she knew that: but it was wholly her own business, and she had the sense of having conducted herself, of still so doing, with almost violent conformity.

"I've an idea - in fact I feel sure—that Aunt Maud means to write to you; and I think you had better know it." So much as this she said to him as soon as they met, but immediately adding to it: "So as to make up your mind how to take her. I know pretty well what she'll say to you."

"Then will you kindly tell me?"

She thought a little. "I can't do that. I should spoil it. She'll do the best for her own idea."

"Her idea, you mean, that I'm a sort of a scoundrel; or, at the best, not good enough for you?"

They were side by side again in their penny chairs, and Kate had another pause. "Not good enough for *her."*

"Oh I see. And that's necessary."

He put it as a truth rather more than as a question; but there had been plenty of truths between them that each had contradicted. Kate, however, let this one sufficiently pass, only saying the next moment: "She has behaved extraordinarily."

"And so have we," Densher declared. "I think, you know, we've been awfully decent."

"For ourselves, for each other, for people in general, yes. But not for *her.* For her," said Kate, "we've been monstrous. She has been giving us rope. So if she does send for you," the girl repeated, "you must know where you are."

"That I always know. It's where *you* are that concerns me."

"Well," said Kate after an instant, "her idea of that is what you'll have from her." He gave her a long look, and whatever else people who wouldn't let her alone might have wished, for her advancement, his long looks were the thing in the world she could never have enough of. What she felt was that, whatever might happen, she must keep them, must make them most completely her possession; and it was already strange enough that she reasoned, or at all events began to act, as if she might work them in with other and alien things, privately

cherish them and yet, as regards the rigour of it, pay no price. She looked it well in the face, she took it intensely home, that they were lovers; she rejoiced to herself and, frankly, to him, in their wearing of the name; but, distinguished creature that, in her way, she was, she took a view of this character that scarce squared with the conventional. The character itself she insisted on as their right, taking that so for granted that it didn't seem even bold; but Densher, though he agreed with her, found himself moved to wonder at her simplifications, her values. Life might prove difficult—was evidently going to; but meanwhile they had each other, and that was everything. This was her reasoning, but meanwhile, for *him,* each other was what they didn't have, and it was just the point. Repeatedly, however, it was a point that, in the face of strange and special things, he judged it rather awkwardly gross to urge. It was impossible to keep Mrs. Lowder out of their scheme. She stood there too close to it and too solidly; it had to open a gate, at a given point, do what they would, to take her in. And she came in, always, while they sat together rather helplessly watching her, as in a coach-and-four; she drove round their prospect as the principal lady at the circus drives round the ring, and she stopped the coach in the middle to alight with majesty. It was our young man's sense that she was magnificently vulgar, but yet quite that this wasn't all. It wasn't with her vulgarity that she felt his want of means, though that might have helped her richly to embroider it; nor was it with the same infirmity that she was strong original dangerous.

His want of means—of means sufficient for any one but himself—was really the great ugliness, and was moreover at no time more ugly for him than when it rose there, as it did seem to rise, all shameless, face to face with the elements in Kate's life colloquially and conveniently classed by both of them as funny. He sometimes indeed, for that matter, asked himself if these elements were as funny as the innermost fact, so often vivid to him, of his own consciousness—his private inability to believe he should ever be rich. His conviction on this head was in truth quite positive and a thing by itself; he failed, after analysis, to understand it, though he had naturally more lights on it than any one else. He knew how it subsisted in spite of an equal consciousness of his being neither mentally nor physically quite helpless, neither a dunce nor a cripple; he knew it to be absolute, though secret, and also, strange to say, about common undertakings, not discouraging, not prohibitive. Only now was he having to think if it were prohibitive in respect to marriage; only now, for the first time, had he to weigh his case in scales. The scales, as he sat with Kate, often dangled in the line of his vision; he saw them, large and black, while he talked or listened, take, in the bright air, singular positions. Sometimes the right was down and sometimes the left; never a happy equipoiseone or the other always kicking the beam. Thus was kept before him the question of whether it were more ignoble to ask a woman to take her chance with you, or to accept it from your conscience that her chance could be at the best but one of the degrees of privation; whether too, otherwise, marrying for money mightn't after all be a smaller cause of shame than the mere dread of marrying without. Through these variations of mood and view, nevertheless, the mark on his forehead stood clear; he saw himself remain without whether he married or not. It was a line on which his fancy could be admirably active; the innumerable ways of making money were beautifully present to him; he could have handled them for his newspaper as easily as he handled everything. He was quite aware how he handled everything; it was another mark on his forehead: the pair of smudges from the thumb of fortune, the brand on the passive fleece, dated from the primal hour and kept each other company. He wrote, as for print, with deplorable ease; since there had been nothing to stop him even at the age of ten, so there was as little at twenty; it was part of his fate in the first place and part of the wretched public's in the second. The innumerable ways of making money were, no doubt, at all events, what his imagination often was busy with after he had tilted his chair and thrown back his head with his hands clasped behind it. What would most have prolonged that attitude, moreover, was the reflexion that the ways were ways only for others. Within the minute now—however this might be—he was aware of a nearer view than he had yet quite had of those circumstances on his companion's part that made least for simplicity of relation. He saw above all how she saw them herself, for she spoke of them at present with the last frankness, telling him of her visit to her father and giving him, in an account of her subsequent scene with her sister, an instance of how she was perpetually reduced to patching-up, in one way or another, that unfortunate woman's hopes.

"The tune," she exclaimed, "to which we're a failure as a family!" With which he had it all again from her—and this time, as it seemed to him, more than all: the dishonour her father had brought them, his folly and cruelty and wickedness; the wounded state of her mother, abandoned despoiled and helpless, yet, for the management of such a home as remained to them, dreadfully unreasonable too; the extinction of her two young brothers—one, at nineteen, the eldest of the house, by typhoid fever contracted at a poisonous little place, as they had afterwards found out, that they had taken for a summer; the other, the flower of the flock, a middy on the Britannia, dreadfully drowned, and not even by an accident at sea, but by cramp, unrescued, while bathing, too late in the autumn, in a wretched little river during a holiday visit to the home of a shipmate. Then Marian's unnatural marriage, in itself a kind of spiritless turning of the other cheek to fortune: her actual wretchedness and plaintiveness, her greasy children, her impossible claims, her odious visitors—these things completed the proof of the heaviness, for them all, of the hand of fate. Kate confessedly described them with an excess of impatience; it was much of her charm for Densher that she gave in general that turn to her descriptions, partly as if to amuse him by free and humourous colour, partly—and that charm was the

greatest—as if to work off, for her own relief, her constant perception of the incongruity of things. She had seen the general show too early and too sharply, and was so intelligent that she knew it and allowed for that misfortune; therefore when, in talk with him, she was violent and almost unfeminine, it was quite as if they had settled, for intercourse, on the short cut of the fantastic and the happy language of exaggeration. It had come to be definite between them at a primary stage that, if they could have no other straight way, the realm of thought at least was open to them. They could think whatever they liked about whatever they would—in other words they could say it. Saying it for each other, for each other alone, only of course added to the taste. The implication was thereby constant that what they said when not together had no taste for them at all, and nothing could have served more to launch them, at special hours, on their small floating island than such an assumption that they were only making believe everywhere else. Our young man, it must be added, was conscious enough that it was Kate who profited most by this particular play of the fact of intimacy. It always struck him she had more life than he to react from, and when she recounted the dark disasters of her house and glanced at the hard odd offset of her present exaltation—since as exaltation it was apparently to be considered—he felt his own grey domestic annals make little show. It was naturally, in all such reference, the question of her father's character that engaged him most, but her picture of her adventure in Chirk Street[h] gave him a sense of how little as yet that character was clear to him. What was it, to speak plainly, that Mr. Croy had originally done?

"I don't know—and I don't want to. I only know that years and years ago—when I was about fifteen—something or other happened that made him impossible. I mean impossible for the world at large first, and then, little by little, for mother. We of course didn't know it at the time," Kate explained, "but we knew it later; and it was, oddly enough, my sister who first made out that he had done something. I can hear her now—the way, one cold black Sunday morning when, on account of an extraordinary fog, we hadn't gone to church, she broke it to me by the school-room fire. I was reading a history-book by the lamp—when we didn't go to church we had to read history-books-and I suddenly heard her say, out of the fog, which was in the room, and apropos of nothing: 'Papa has done something wicked.' And the curious thing was that I believed it on the spot and have believed it ever since, though she could tell me nothing more—neither what was the wickedness, nor how she knew, nor what would happen to him, nor anything else about it. We had our sense always that all sorts of things had happened, were all the while happening, to him; so that when Marian only said she was sure, tremendously sure, that she had made it out for herself, but that that was enough, I took her word for it—it seemed somehow so natural. We were not, however, to ask mother—which made it more natural still, and I said never a word. But mother, strangely enough, spoke of it to me, in time, of her own accord—this was very much later on. He hadn't been with us for ever so long, but we were used to that. She must have had some fear, some conviction that I had an idea, some idea of her own that it was the best thing to do. She came out as abruptly as Marian had done: 'If you hear anything against your father—anything I mean except that he's odious and vile—remember it's perfectly false.' That was the way I knew it was true, though I recall my saying to her then that I of course knew it wasn't. She might have told me it was true, and yet have trusted me to contradict fiercely enough any accusation of him that I should meet—to contradict it much more fiercely and effectively, I think, than she would have done herself. As it happens, however," the girl went on, "I've never had occasion, and I've been conscious of it with a sort of surprise. It has made the world seem at times more decent. No one has so much as breathed to me. That has been a part of the silence, the silence that surrounds him, the silence that, for the world, has washed him out. He doesn't exist for people. And yet I'm as sure as ever. In fact, though I know no more than I did then, I'm more sure. And that," she wound up, "is what I sit here and tell you about my own father. If you don't call it a proof of confidence I don't know what will satisfy you."

"It satisfies me beautifully," Densher returned, "but it doesn't, my dear child, very greatly enlighten me. You don't, you know, really tell me anything. It's so vague that what am I to think but that you may very well be mistaken? What has he done, if no one can name it?"

"He has done everything."

"Oh—everything! Everything's nothing."

"Well then," said Kate, "he has done some particular thing. It's known—only, thank God, not to us. But it has been the end of him. You could doubtless find out with a little trouble. You can ask about."

Densher for a moment said nothing; but the next moment he made it up. "I wouldn't find out for the world, and I'd rather lose my tongue than put a question."

"And yet it's a part of me," said Kate.

"A part of you?"

"My father's dishonour." Then she sounded for him, but more deeply than ever yet, her note of proud still pessimism. "How can such a thing as that not be the great thing in one's life?"

She had to take from him again, on this, one of his long looks, and she took it to its deepest, its headiest dregs. “I shall ask you, for the great thing in your life,” he said, “to depend on me a little more.” After which, just debating, “Doesn’t he belong to some club?” he asked.

She had a grave headshake. “He used to—to many.”

“But he has dropped them?”

“They’ve dropped *him.* Of that I’m sure. It ought to do for you. I offered him,” the girl immediately continued—“and it was for that I went to him—to come and be with him, make a home for him so far as is possible. But he won’t hear of it.”

Densher took this in with marked but generous wonder. “You offered him—‘impossible’ as you describe him to me—to live with him and share his disadvantages?” The young man saw for the moment only the high beauty of it. “You *are* gallant!”

“Because it strikes you as being brave for him?” She wouldn’t in the least have this. “It wasn’t courage—it was the opposite. I did it to save myself—to escape.”

He had his air, so constant at this stage, as of her giving him finer things than any one to think about. “Escape from what?”

“From everything.”

“Do you by any chance mean from me?”

“No; I spoke to him of you, told him—or what amounted to it—that I would bring you, if he would allow it, with me.”

“But he won’t allow it,” said Densher.

“Won’t hear of it on any terms. He won’t help me, won’t save me, won’t hold out a finger to me,” Kate went on. “He simply wriggles away, in his inimitable manner, and throws me back.”

“Back then, after all, thank goodness,” Densher concurred, “on me”.

But she spoke again as with the sole vision of the whole scene she had evoked. “It’s a pity, because you’d like him. He’s wonderful—he’s charming.” Her companion gave one of the laughs that showed again how inveterately he felt in her tone something that banished the talk of other women, so far as he knew other women, to the dull desert of the conventional, and she had already continued. “He would make himself delightful to you.”

“Even while objecting to me?”

“Well, he likes to please,” the girl explained—“personally. I’ve seen it make him wonderful. He would appreciate you and be clever with you. It’s to *me* he objects—that is as to my liking you.”

“Heaven be praised then,” cried Densher, “that you like me enough for the objection!”

But she met it after an instant with some inconsequence. “I don’t. I offered to give you up, if necessary, to go to him. But it made no difference, and that’s what I mean,” she pursued, “by his declining me on any terms. The point is, you see, that I don’t escape.”

Densher wondered. “But if you didn’t wish to escape *me?”*

“I wished to escape Aunt Maud. But he insists that it’s through her and through her only that I may help him; just as Marian insists that it’s through her, and through her only, that I can help *her.* That’s what I mean,” she again explained, “by their turning me back.”

The young man thought. “Your sister turns you back too?”

“Oh with a push!”

“But have you offered to live with your sister?”

“I would in a moment if she’d have me. That’s all my virtue—a narrow little family feeling. I’ve a small stupid piety—I don’t know what to call it.” Kate bravely stuck to that; she made it out. “Sometimes, alone, I’ve to smother my shrieks when I think of my poor mother. She went through things—they pulled her down; I know what they were now—I didn’t then, for I was a pig; and my position, compared with hers, is an insolence of success. That’s what Marian keeps before me; that’s what papa himself, as I say, so inimitably does. My position’s a value, a great value, for them both”—she followed and followed. Lucid and ironic, she knew no merciful muddle. “It’s *the* value—the only one they have.”

Everything between our young couple moved today, in spite of their pauses, their margin, to a quicker measure—the quickness of anxiety playing lightning-like in the sultriness. Densher watched, decidedly, as he had never done before. “And the fact you speak of holds you!”

“Of course it holds me. It’s a perpetual sound in my ears. It makes me ask myself if I’ve any right to personal happiness, any right to anything but to be as rich and overflowing, as smart and shining, as I can be made.”

Densher had a pause. “Oh you might by good luck have the personal happiness too.”

Her immediate answer to this was a silence like his own; after which she gave him straight in the face, but quite simply and quietly: “Darling!”

It took him another moment; then he was also quiet and simple. “Will you settle it by our being married tomorrow—as we can, with perfect ease, civilly?”

“Let us wait to arrange it,” Kate presently replied, “till after you’ve seen her.”

“Do you call that adoring me?” Densher demanded.

They were talking, for the time, with the strangest mixture of deliberation and directness, and nothing could have been more in the tone of it than the way she at last said: “You’re afraid of her yourself.”

He gave rather a glazed smile. “For young persons of a great distinction and a very high spirit we’re a caution!”

“Yes,” she took it straight up; “we’re hideously intelligent. But there’s fun in it too. We must get our fun where we can. I think,” she added, and for that matter not without courage, “our relation’s quite beautiful. It’s not a bit vulgar. I cling to some saving romance in things.”

It made him break into a laugh that had more freedom than his smile. “How you must be afraid you’ll chuck me!”

“No, no, *that* would be vulgar. But of course,” she admitted, “I do see my danger of doing something base.”

“Then what can be so base as sacrificing me?”

“I *shan’t* sacrifice you. Don’t cry out till you’re hurt. I shall sacrifice nobody and nothing, and that’s just my situation, that I want and that I shall try for everything. That,” she wound up “is how I see myself (and how I see you quite as much) acting for them.”

“For ‘them’?”—and the young man extravagantly marked his coldness. “Thank you!”

“Don’t you care for them?”

“Why should I? What are they to me but a serious nuisance?” As soon as he had permitted himself this qualification of the unfortunate persons she so perversely cherished he repented of his roughness—and partly because he expected a flash from her. But it was one of her finest sides that she sometimes flashed with a mere mild glow. “I don’t see why you don’t make out a little more that if we avoid stupidity we may do *all*. We may keep her.”

He stared. “Make her pension us?”

“Well, wait at least till we’ve seen.”

He thought. “Seen what can be got out of her?”

Kate for a moment said nothing. “After all I never asked her; never, when our troubles were at the worst, appealed to her nor went near her. She fixed upon me herself, settled on me with her wonderful gilded claws.”

“You speak,” Densher observed, “as if she were a vulture.”

“Call it an eagle—with a gilded beak as well, and with wings for great flights. If she’s a thing of the air, in short—say at once a great seamed silk balloon—I never myself got into her car. I was her choice.”

It had really, her sketch of the affair, a high colour and a great style; at all of which he gazed a minute as at a picture by a master. “What she must see in you!”

“Wonders!” And, speaking it loud, she stood straight up. “Everything. There it is.”

Yes, there it was, and as she remained before him he continued to face it. “So that what you mean is that I’m to do my part in somehow squaring her?”

“See her, see her,” Kate said with impatience.

“And grovel to her?”

“Ah do what you like!” And she walked in her impatience away.

—II—

His eyes had followed her at this time quite long enough, before he overtook her, to make out more than ever in the poise of her head, the pride of her step—he didn’t know what best to call it—a part at least of Mrs. Lowder’s reasons. He consciously winced while he figured his presenting himself as a reason opposed to these; though at the same moment, with the source of Aunt Maud’s inspiration thus before him, he was prepared to conform, by almost any abject attitude or profitable compromise, to his companion’s easy injunction. He would do as *she* liked—his own liking might come off as it would. He would help her to the utmost of his power; for, all the rest of this day and the next, her easy injunction, tossed off that way as she turned her beautiful back, was like the crack of a great whip in the blue air, the high element in which Mrs. Lowder hung. He wouldn’t grovel perhaps—he wasn’t quite ready for that; but he would be patient, ridiculous, reasonable, unreasonable, and above all deeply diplomatic. He would be clever with all his cleverness—which he now shook hard, as he sometimes shook his poor dear shabby old watch, to start it up again. It wasn’t, thank goodness, as if there weren’t plenty of that “factor” (to use one of his great newspaper-words), and with what they could muster between them it would be little to the credit of their star, however pale, that defeat and surrender—surrender so early, so immediate—should have to ensue. It was not indeed that he thought of that disaster as at the worst a direct sacrifice of their possibilities: he imaged it—which was enough—as some proved vanity, some exposed fatuity in the idea of bringing Mrs. Lowder round. When shortly afterwards, in this lady’s vast drawing-room-the apartments at Lancaster Gate had struck him from the first as of prodigious extent—he awaited her, at her request, conveyed in a “reply-paid” telegram, his theory was that of their still clinging to their idea, though with a sense of the difficulty of it really enlarged to the scale of the place.

He had the place for a long time—it seemed to him a quarter of an hour—to himself; and while Aunt Maud kept him and kept him, while observation and reflexion crowded on him, he asked himself what was to be expected of a person who could treat one like that.[7] The visit, the hour were of her own proposing, so that her delay, no doubt, was but part of a general plan of putting him to inconvenience. As he walked to and fro, however, taking in the message of her massive florid furniture, the immense expression of her signs and symbols, he had as little doubt of the inconvenience he was prepared to suffer. He found himself even facing the thought that he had nothing to fall back on, and that that was as great an humiliation in a good cause as a proud man could desire. It hadn’t yet been so distinct to him that he made no show—literally not the smallest; so complete a show seemed made there all about him; so almost abnormally affirmative, so aggressively erect, were the huge heavy objects that syllabled his hostess’s story. “When all’s said and done, you know, she’s colossally vulgar”—he had once all but noted that of her to her niece; only just keeping it back at the last, keeping it to himself with all its danger about it. It mattered because it bore so directly, and he at all events quite felt it a thing that Kate herself would some day bring out to him. It bore directly at present, and really all the more that somehow, strangely, it didn’t in the least characterise the poor woman as dull or stale. She was vulgar with freshness, almost with beauty, since there was beauty, to a degree, in the play of so big and bold a temperament. She was in fine quite the largest possible quantity to deal with; and he was in the cage of the lioness without his whip—the whip, in a word, of a supply of proper retorts. He had no retort but that he loved the girl—which in such a house as that was painfully cheap. Kate had mentioned to him more than once that her aunt was Passionate, speaking of it as a kind of offset and uttering it as with a capital P, marking it as something that he might, that he in fact ought to, turn about in some way to their advantage. He wondered at this hour to what advantage he could turn it; but the case grew less simple the longer he waited. Decidedly there was something he hadn’t enough of.

His slow march to and fro seemed to give him the very measure; as he paced and paced the distance it became the desert of his poverty; at the sight of which expanse moreover he could pretend to himself as little as before that the desert looked redeemable. Lancaster Gate looked rich—that was all the effect; which it was unthinkable that any state of his own should ever remotely resemble. He read more vividly, more critically, as has been hinted, the appearances about him; and they did nothing so much as make him wonder at his aesthetic reaction. He hadn’t known—and in spite of Kate’s repeated reference to her own rebellions of taste—that he should “mind” so much how an independent lady might decorate her house. It was the language of the house itself that spoke to him, writing out for him with surpassing breadth and freedom the associations and conceptions, the ideals and possibilities of the mistress. Never, he felt sure, had he seen so many things so unanimously ugly—operatively, ominously so cruel. He was glad to have found this last name for the whole character; “cruel” somehow played into the subject for an article—an article that his impression put straight into his mind. He would write about the heavy horrors that could still flourish, that lifted their undiminished

heads, in an age so proud of its short way with false gods; and it would be funny if what he should have got from Mrs. Lowder were to prove after all but a small amount of copy. Yet the great thing, really the dark thing, was that, even while he thought of the quick column he might add up, he felt it less easy to laugh at the heavy horrors than to quail before them. He couldn't describe and dismiss them collectively, call them either Mid-Victorian or Early—not being certain they were rangeable under one rubric. It was only manifest they were splendid and were furthermore conclusively British. They constituted an order and abounded in rare material—precious woods, metals, stuffs, stones. He had never dreamed of anything so fringed and scalloped, so buttoned and corded, drawn everywhere so tight and curled everywhere so thick. He had never dreamed of so much gilt and glass, so much satin and plush, so much rosewood and marble and malachite. But it was above all the solid forms, the wasted finish, the misguided cost, the general attestation of morality and money, a good conscience and a big balance. These things finally represented for him a portentous negation of his own world of thought—of which, for that matter, in presence of them, he became as for the first time hopelessly aware. They revealed it to him by their merciless difference.

His interview with Aunt Maud, none the less, took by no means the turn he had expected. Passionate though her nature, no doubt, Mrs. Lowder on this occasion neither threatened nor appealed. Her arms of aggression, her weapons of defence, were presumably close at hand, but she left them untouched and unmentioned, and was in fact so bland that he properly perceived only afterwards how adroit she had been. He properly perceived something else as well, which complicated his case; he shouldn't have known what to call it if he hadn't called it her really imprudent good nature. Her blandness, in other words, wasn't mere policy—he wasn't dangerous enough for policy: it was the result, he could see, of her fairly liking him a little. From the moment she did that she herself became more interesting, and who knew what might happen should he take to liking *her?* Well, it was a risk he naturally must face. She fought him at any rate but with one hand, with a few loose grains of stray powder. He recognised at the end of ten minutes, and even without her explaining it, that if she had made him wait it hadn't been to wound him; they had by that time almost directly met on the fact of her intention. She had wanted him to think for himself of what she proposed to say to him—not having otherwise announced it; wanted to let it come home to him on the spot, as she had shrewdly believed it would. Her first question, on appearing, had practically been as to whether he hadn't taken her hint, and this enquiry assumed so many things that it immediately made discussion frank and large. He knew, with the question put, that the hint was just what he *had* taken; knew that she had made him quickly forgive her the display of her power; knew that if he didn't take care he should understand her, and the strength of her purpose, to say nothing of that of her imagination, nothing of the length of her purse, only too well. Yet he pulled himself up with the thought too that he wasn't going to be afraid of understanding her; he was just going to understand and understand without detriment to the feeblest, even, of his passions. The play of one's mind gave one away, at the best, dreadfully, in action, in the need for action, where simplicity was all; but when one couldn't prevent it the thing was to make it complete. There would never be mistakes but for the original fun of mistakes. What he must *use* his fatal intelligence for was to resist. Mrs. Lowder meanwhile might use it for whatever she liked.

It was after she had begun her statement of her own idea about Kate that he began on his side to reflect that—with her manner of offering it as really sufficient if he would take the trouble to embrace it—she couldn't half hate him. That was all, positively, she seemed to show herself for the time as attempting; clearly, if she did her intention justice she would have nothing more disagreeable to do. "If I hadn't been ready to go very much further, you understand, I wouldn't have gone so far. I don't care what you repeat to her—the more you repeat to her perhaps the better; and at any rate there's nothing she doesn't already know. I don't say it for her; I say it for you—when I want to reach my niece I know how to do it straight." So Aunt Maud delivered herself—as with homely benevolence, in the simplest but the clearest terms; virtually conveying that, though a word to the wise was doubtless, in spite of the adage, not always enough, a word to the good could never fail to be. The sense our young man read into her words was that she liked him because he was good—was really by her measure good enough: good enough that is to give up her niece for her and go his way in peace. But was he good enough—by his own measure? He fairly wondered, while she more fully expressed herself, if it might be his doom to prove so. "She's the finest possible creature—of course you flatter yourself you know it. But I know it quite as well as you possibly can—by which I mean a good deal better yet; and the tune to which I'm ready to prove my faith compares favourably enough, I think, with anything you can do. I don't say it because she's my niece—that's nothing to me: I might have had fifty nieces, and I wouldn't have brought one of them to this place if I hadn't found her to my taste. I don't say I wouldn't have done something else, but I wouldn't have put up with her presence. Kate's presence, by good fortune, I marked early. Kate's presence—unluckily for *you*—is everything I could possibly wish. Kate's presence is, in short, as fine as you know, and I've been keeping it for the comfort of my declining years. I've watched it long; I've been saving it up and letting it, as you say of investments, appreciate; and you may judge whether, now it has begun to pay so, I'm likely to consent to treat for it with any but a high bidder. I can do the best with her, and I've my idea of the best."

"Oh I quite conceive," said Densher, "that your idea of the best isn't me."

It was an oddity of Mrs. Lowder's that her face in speech was like a lighted window at night, but that silence immediately drew the curtain. The occasion for reply allowed by her silence was never easy to take, yet she was still less easy to interrupt. The great glaze of her surface, at all events, gave her visitor no present help. "I didn't ask you to come to hear what it isn't—I asked you to come to hear what it is."

"Of course," Densher laughed, "that's very great indeed."

His hostess went on as if his contribution to the subject were barely relevant. "I want to see her high, high up—high up and in the light."

"Ah you naturally want to marry her to a duke and are eager to smooth away any hitch."

She gave him so, on this, the mere effect of the drawn blind that it quite forced him at first into the sense, possibly just, of his having shown for flippant, perhaps even for low. He had been looked at so, in blighted moments of presumptuous youth, by big cold public men, but never, so far as he could recall, by any private lady. More than anything yet it gave him the measure of his companion's subtlety, and thereby of Kate's possible career. "Don't be too impossible!"—he feared from his friend, for a moment, some such answer as that; and then felt, as she spoke otherwise, as if she were letting him off easily. "I want her to marry a great man." That was all; but, more and more, it was enough; and if it hadn't been her next words would have made it so. "And I think of her what I think. There you are."

They sat for a little face to face upon it, and he was conscious of something deeper still, of something she wished him to understand if he only would. To that extent she did appeal—appealed to the intelligence she desired to show she believed him to possess. He was meanwhile, at all events, not the man wholly to fail of comprehension. "Of course I'm aware how little I can answer to any fond proud dream. You've a view—a grand one; into which I perfectly enter. I thoroughly understand what I'm not, and I'm much obliged to you for not reminding me of it in any rougher way." She said nothing—she kept that up; it might even have been to let him go further, if he was capable of it, in the way of poorness of spirit. It was one of those cases in which a man couldn't show, if he showed at all, save for poor; unless indeed he preferred to show for asinine. It was the plain truth: he *was*-on Mrs. Lowder's basis, the only one in question—a very small quantity, and he did know, damnably, what made quantities large. He desired to be perfectly simple, yet in the midst of that effort a deeper apprehension throbbed. Aunt Maud clearly conveyed it, though he couldn't later on have said how. "You don't really matter, I believe, so much as you think, and I'm not going to make you a martyr by banishing you. Your performances with Kate in the Park are ridiculous so far as they're meant as consideration for me; and I had much rather see you myself—since you're, in your way, my dear young man, delightful—and arrange with you, count with you, as I easily, as I perfectly should. Do you suppose me so stupid as to quarrel with you if it's not really necessary? It won't—it would be too absurd!—*be* necessary. I can bite your head off any day, any day I really open my mouth; and I'm dealing with you now, see—and successfully judge—without opening it. I do things handsomely all round—I place you in the presence of the plan with which, from the moment it's a case of taking you seriously, you're incompatible. Come then as near as you like, walk all round it—don't be afraid you'll hurt it!—and live on with it before you."

He afterwards felt that if she hadn't absolutely phrased all this it was because she so soon made him out as going with her far enough. He was so pleasantly affected by her asking no promise of him, her not proposing he should pay for her indulgence by his word of honour not to interfere, that he gave her a kind of general assurance of esteem. Immediately afterwards then he was to speak of these things to Kate, and what by that time came back to him first of all was the way he had said to her—he mentioned it to the girl—very much as one of a pair of lovers says in a rupture by mutual consent: "I hope immensely of course that you'll always regard me as a friend." This had perhaps been going far—he submitted it all to Kate; but really there had been so much in it that it was to be looked at, as they might say, wholly in its own light. Other things than those we have presented had come up before the close of his scene with Aunt Maud, but this matter of her not treating him as a peril of the first order easily predominated. There was moreover plenty to talk about on the occasion of his subsequent passage with our young woman, it having been put to him abruptly, the night before, that he might give himself a lift and do his newspaper a service—so flatteringly was the case expressed—by going for fifteen or twenty weeks to America. The idea of a series of letters from the United States from the strictly social point of view had for some time been nursed in the inner sanctuary at whose door he sat, and the moment was now deemed happy for letting it loose. The imprisoned thought had, in a word, on the opening of the door, flown straight out into Densher's face, or perched at least on his shoulder, making him look up in surprise from his mere inky office-table. His account of the matter to Kate was that he couldn't refuse—not being in a position as yet to refuse anything; but that his being chosen for such an errand confounded his sense of proportion. He was definite as to his scarce knowing how to measure the honour, which struck him as equivocal; he hadn't quite supposed himself the man for the class of job. This confused consciousness, he intimated, he had promptly enough betrayed to his manager; with the effect, however, of seeing the question surprisingly clear up. What it came to was that the sort of twaddle that wasn't in his chords was, unexpectedly, just what they happened this time not to want. They wanted his letters, for queer

reasons, about as good as he could let them come; he was to play his own little tune and not be afraid; that was the whole point.

It would have been the whole, that is, had there not been a sharper one still in the circumstance that he was to start at once. His mission, as they called it at the office, would probably be over by the end of June, which was desirable; but to bring that about he must now not lose a week; his enquiries, he understood, were to cover the whole ground, and there were reasons of state—reasons operating at the seat of empire in Fleet Street—why the nail should be struck on the head. Densher made no secret to Kate of his having asked for a day to decide; and his account of that matter was that he felt he owed it to her to speak to her first. She assured him on this that nothing so much as that scruple had yet shown her how they were bound together: she was clearly proud of his letting a thing of such importance depend on her, but she was clearer still as to his instant duty. She rejoiced in his prospect and urged him to his task; she should miss him too dreadfully—of course she should miss him; but she made so little of it that she spoke with jubilation of what he would see and would do. She made so much of this last quantity that he laughed at her innocence, though also with scarce the heart to give her the real size of his drop in the daily bucket. He was struck at the same time with her happy grasp of what had really occurred in Fleet Street—all the more that it was his own final reading. He was to pull the subject up—that was just what they wanted; and it would take more than all the United States together, visit them each as he might, to let *him* down. It was just because he didn't nose about and babble, because he wasn't the usual gossip-monger, that they had picked him out. It was a branch of their correspondence with which they evidently wished a new tone associated, such a tone as, from now on, it would have always to take from his example.

"How you ought indeed, when you understand so well, to be a journalist's wife!" Densher exclaimed in admiration even while she struck him as fairly hurrying him off.

But she was almost impatient of the praise. "What do you expect one *not* to understand when one cares for you?"

"Ah then I'll put it otherwise and say 'How much you care for me!' "

"Yes," she assented; "it fairly redeems my stupidity. I *shall,* with a chance to show it," she added, "have some imagination for you."

She spoke of the future this time as so little contingent that he felt a queerness of conscience in making her the report that he presently arrived at on what had passed for him with the real arbiter of their destiny. The way for that had been blocked a little by his news from Fleet Street; but in the crucible of their happy discussion this element soon melted into the other, and in the mixture that ensued the parts were not to be distinguished. The young man moreover, before taking his leave, was to see why Kate had spoken with a wisdom indifferent to that, and was to come to the vision by a devious way that deepened the final cheer. Their faces were turned to the illumined quarter as soon as he had answered her question on the score of their being to appearance able to play patience, a prodigious game of patience, with success. It was for the possibility of the appearance that she had a few days before so earnestly pressed him to see her aunt; and if after his hour with that lady it had not struck Densher that he had seen her to the happiest purpose the poor facts flushed with a better meaning as Kate, one by one, took them up.

"If she consents to your coming why isn't that everything?"

"It is everything; everything *she* thinks it. It's the probability—I mean as Mrs. Lowder measures probability—that I may be prevented from becoming a complication for her by some arrangement, *any* arrangement, through which you shall see me often and easily. She's sure of my want of money, and that gives her time. She believes in my having a certain amount of delicacy, in my wishing to better my state before I put the pistol to your head in respect to sharing it. The time this will take figures for her as the time that will help her if she doesn't spoil her chance by treating me badly. She doesn't at all wish moreover," Densher went on, "to treat me badly, for I believe, upon my honour, odd as it may sound to you, that she personally rather likes me and that if you weren't in question I might almost become her pet young man. She doesn't disparage intellect and culture—quite the contrary; she wants them to adorn her board and be associated with her name; and I'm sure it has sometimes cost her a real pang that I should be so desirable, at once, and so impossible." He paused a moment, and his companion then saw how strange a smile was in his face—a smile as strange even as the adjunct in her own of this informing vision. "I quite suspect her of believing that, if the truth were known, she likes me literally better than—deep down—you yourself do: wherefore she does me the honour to think I may be safely left to kill my own cause. There, as I say, comes in her margin. I'm not the sort of stuff of romance that wears, that washes, that survives use, that resists familiarity. Once in any degree admit that, and your pride and prejudice will take care of the rest!—the pride fed full, meanwhile, by the system she means to practise with you, and the prejudice excited by the comparisons she'll enable you to make, from which I shall come off badly. She likes me, but she'll never like me so much as when she has succeeded a little better in making me look wretched. For then *you'll* like me less."

Kate showed for this evocation a due interest, but no alarm; and it was a little as if to pay his tender cynicism back in kind that she after an instant replied: “I see, I see—what an immense affair she must think me! One was aware, but you deepen the impression.”

“I think you’ll make no mistake,” said Densher, “in letting it go as deep as it will.”

He had given her indeed, she made no scruple of showing, plenty to amuse herself with. “Her facing the music, her making you boldly as welcome as you say—that’s an awfully big theory, you know, and worthy of all the other big things that in one’s acquaintance with people give her a place so apart.”

“Oh she’s grand,” the young man allowed; “she’s on the scale altogether of the car of Juggernaut[i]—which was a kind of image that came to me yesterday while I waited for her at Lancaster Gate. The things in your drawing-room there were like the forms of the strange idols, the mystic excrescences, with which one may suppose the front of the car to bristle.”

“Yes, aren’t they?” the girl returned; and they had, over all that aspect of their wonderful lady, one of those deep and free interchanges that made everything but confidence a false note for them. There were complications, there were questions; but they were so much more together than they were anything else. Kate uttered for a while no word of refutation of Aunt Maud’s “big” diplomacy, and they left it there, as they would have left any other fine product, for a monument to her powers. But, Densher related further, he had had in other respects too the car of Juggernaut to face; he omitted nothing from his account of his visit; least of all the way Aunt Maud had frankly at last—though indeed only under artful pressure—fallen foul of his very type, his want of the right marks, his foreign accidents, his queer antecedents. She had told him he was but half a Briton, which, he granted Kate, would have been dreadful if he hadn’t so let himself in for it.

“I was really curious, you see,” he explained, “to find out from her what sort of queer creature, what sort of social anomaly, in the light of such conventions as hers, such an education as mine makes one pass for.”

Kate said nothing for a little; but then, “Why should you care?” she asked.

“Oh,” he laughed, “I like her so much; and then, for a man of my trade, her views, her spirit, are essentially a thing to get hold of: they belong to the great public mind that we meet at every turn and that we must keep setting up ‘codes’ with. Besides,” he added, “I want to please her personally.”

“Ah yes, we must please her personally!” his companion echoed; and the words may represent all their definite recognition, at the time, of Densher’s politic gain. They had in fact between this and his start for New York many matters to handle, and the question he now touched upon came up for Kate above all. She looked at him as if he had really told her aunt more of his immediate personal story than he had ever told herself. This, if it had been so, was an accident, and it perched him there with her for half an hour, like a cicerone[j] and his victim on a tower-top, before as much of the bird’s-eye view of his early years abroad, his migratory parents, his Swiss schools, his German university, as she had easy attention for. A man, he intimated, a man of their world, would have spotted him straight as to many of these points; a man of their world, so far as they had a world, would have been through the English mill. But it was none the less charming to make his confession to a woman; women had in fact for such differences blessedly more imagination and blessedly more sympathy. Kate showed at present as much of both as his case could require; when she had had it from beginning to end she declared that she now made out more than ever yet what she loved him for. She had herself, as a child, lived with some continuity in the world across the Channel, coming home again still a child; and had participated after that, in her teens, in her mother’s brief but repeated retreats to Dresden, to Florence, to Biarritz, weak and expensive attempts at economy from which there stuck to her—though in general coldly expressed, through the instinctive avoidance of cheap raptures—the religion of foreign things. When it was revealed to her how many more foreign things were in Merton Densher than he had hitherto taken the trouble to catalogue, she almost faced him as if he were a map of the continent or a handsome present of a delightful new “Murray.”[k] He hadn’t meant to swagger, he had rather meant to plead, though with Mrs. Lowder he had meant also a little to explain. His father had been, in strange countries, in twenty settlements of the English, British chaplain, resident or occasional, and had had for years the unusual luck of never wanting a billet. His career abroad had therefore been unbroken, and as his stipend had never been great he had educated his children, at the smallest cost, in the schools nearest; which was also a saving of railway-fares. Densher’s mother, it further appeared, had practised on her side a distinguished industry, to the success of which—so far as success ever crowned it—this period of exile had much contributed: she copied, patient lady, famous pictures in great museums, having begun with a happy natural gift and taking in betimes the scale of her opportunity. Copyists abroad of course swarmed, but Mrs. Densher had had a sense and a hand of her own, had arrived at a perfection that persuaded, that even deceived, and that made the “placing” of her work blissfully usual. Her son, who had lost her, held her image sacred, and the effect of his telling Kate all about her, as well as about other matters until then mixed and dim, was to render his history rich, his sources full, his outline anything but common. He had come round, he had come back, he insisted abundantly, to being a Briton: his Cambridge years, his happy connexion, as it had proved, with his father’s college, amply

certified to that, to say nothing of his subsequent plunge into London, which filled up the measure. But brave enough though his descent to English earth, he had passed, by the way, through zones of air that had left their ruffle on his wings—he had been exposed to initiations indelible. Something had happened to him that could never be undone.

When Kate Croy said to him as much he besought her not to insist, declaring that this indeed was what was gravely the matter with him, that he had been but too probably spoiled for native, for insular use. On which, not unnaturally, she insisted the more, assuringhim, without mitigation, that if he was various and complicated, complicated by wit and taste, she wouldn't for the world have had him more helpless; so that he was driven in the end to accuse her of putting the dreadful truth to him in the hollow guise of flattery. She was making him out as all abnormal in order that she might eventually find him impossible, and since she could make it out but with his aid she had to bribe him by feigned delight to help her. If her last word for him in the connexion was that the way he saw himself was just a precious proof the more of his having tasted of the tree and being thereby prepared to assist her to eat, this gives the happy tone of their whole talk; the measure of the flight of time in the near presence of his settled departure. Kate showed, however, that she was to be more literally taken when she spoke of the relief Aunt Maud would draw from the prospect of his absence.

"Yet one can scarcely see why," he replied, "when she fears me so little."

His friend weighed his objection. "Your idea is that she likes you so much that she'll even go so far as to regret losing you?"

Well, he saw it in their constant comprehensive way. "Since what she builds on is the gradual process of your alienation, she may take the view that the process constantly requires me. Mustn't I be there to keep it going? It's in my exile that it may languish."

He went on with that fantasy, but at this point Kate ceased to attend. He saw after a little that she had been following some thought of her own, and he had been feeling the growth of something determinant even through the extravagance of much of the pleasantry, the warm transparent irony, into which their livelier intimacy kept plunging like a confident swimmer. Suddenly she said to him with extraordinary beauty: "I engage myself to you for ever."

The beauty was in everything, and he could have separated nothing—couldn't have thought of her face as distinct from the whole joy. Yet her face had a new light. "And I pledge you—I call God to witness!—every spark of my faith; I give you every drop of my life." That was all, for the moment, but it was enough, and it was almost as quiet as if it were nothing. They were in the open air, in an alley of the Gardens; the great space, which seemed to arch just then higher and spread wider for them, threw them back into deep concentration. They moved by a common instinct to a spot, within sight, that struck them as fairly sequestered, and there, before their time together was spent, they had extorted from concentration every advance it could make them. They had exchanged vows and tokens, sealed their rich compact, solemnised, so far as breathed words and murmured sounds and lighted eyes and clasped hands could do it, their agreement to belong only, and to belong tremendously, to each other. They were to leave the place accordingly an affianced couple, but before they left it other things still had passed. Densher had declared his horror of bringing to a premature end her happy relation with her aunt; and they had worked round together to a high level of discretion. Kate's free profession was that she wished not to deprive *him* of Mrs. Lowder's countenance, which in the long run she was convinced he would continue to enjoy; and as by a blest turn Aunt Maud had demanded of him no promise that would tie his hands they should be able to propitiate their star in their own way and yet remain loyal. One difficulty alone stood out, which Densher named.

"Of course it will never do—we must remember that—from the moment you allow her to found hopes of you for any one else in particular. So long as her view is content to remain as general as at present appears I don't see that we deceive her. At a given hour, you see, she must be undeceived: the only thing therefore is to be ready for the hour and to face it. Only, after all, in that case," the young man observed, "one doesn't quite make out what we shall have got from her."

"What she'll have got from *us*?" Kate put it with a smile. "What she'll have got from us," the girl went on, "is her own affair—it's for *her* to measure. I asked her for nothing," she added; "I never put myself upon her. She must take her risks, and she surely understands them. What we shall have got from her is what we've already spoken of," Kate further explained; "it's that we shall have gained time. And so, for that matter, will she."

Densher gazed a little at all this clearness; his gaze was not at the present hour into romantic obscurity. "Yes; no doubt, in our particular situation, time's everything. And then there's the joy of it."

She hesitated. "Of our secret?"

“Not so much perhaps of our secret in itself, but of what’s represented and, as we must somehow feel, secured to us and made deeper and closer by it.” And his fine face, relaxed into happiness, covered her with all his meaning. “Our being as we are.”

It was as if for a moment she let the meaning sink into her. “So gone?”

“So gone. So extremely gone. However,” he smiled, “we shall go a good deal further.” Her answer to which was only the softness of her silence—a silence that looked out for them both at the far reach of their prospect. This was immense, and they thus took final possession of it. They were practically united and splendidly strong; but there were other things—things they were precisely strong enough to be able successfully to count with and safely to allow for; in consequence of which they would for the present, subject to some better reason, keep their understanding to themselves. It was not indeed however till after one more observation of Densher’s that they felt the question completely straightened out. “The only thing of course is that she may any day absolutely put it to you.”

Kate considered. “Ask me where, on my honour, we are? She may, naturally; but I doubt if in fact she will. While you’re away she’ll make the most of that drop of the tension. She’ll leave me alone.”

“But there’ll be my letters.”

The girl faced his letters. “Very, very many?”

“Very, very, very many—more than ever; and you know what that is! And then,” Densher added, “there’ll be yours.”

“Oh I shan’t leave mine on the hall-table. I shall post them myself.”

He looked at her a moment. “Do you think then I had best address you elsewhere?” After which, before she could quite answer, he added with some emphasis: “I’d rather not, you know. It’s straighter.”

She might again have just waited. “Of course it’s straighter. Don’t be afraid I shan’t be straight. Address me,” she continued, “where you like. I shall be proud enough of its being known you write to me.”

He turned it over for the last clearness. “Even at the risk of its really bringing down the inquisition?”

Well, the last clearness now filled her. “I’m not afraid of the inquisition. If she asks if there’s anything definite between us I know perfectly what I shall say.”

“That I *am* of course ‘gone’ for you?”

“That I love you as I shall never in my life love any one else, and that she can make what she likes of that.” She said it out so splendidly that it was like a new profession of faith, the fulness of a tide breaking through; and the effect of that in turn was to make her companion meet her with such eyes that she had time again before he could otherwise speak. “Besides, she’s just as likely to ask *you.”*

“Not while I’m away.”

“Then when you come back.”

“Well then,” said Densher, “we shall have had our particular joy. But what I feel is,” he candidly added, “that, by an idea of her own, her superior policy, she *won’t* ask me. She’ll let me off. I shan’t have to lie to her.”

“It will be left all to me?” asked Kate.

“All to you!” he tenderly laughed.

But it was oddly, the very next moment, as if he had perhaps been a shade too candid. His discrimination seemed to mark a possible, a natural reality, a reality not wholly disallowed by the account the girl had just given of her own intention. There *was* a difference in the air—even if none other than the supposedly usual difference in truth between man and woman; and it was almost as if the sense of this provoked her. She seemed to cast about an instant, and then she went back a little resentfully to something she had suffered to pass a minute before. She appeared to take up rather more seriously than she need the joke about her freedom to deceive. Yet she did this too in a beautiful way. “Men are too stupid—even you. You didn’t understand just now why, if I post my letters myself, it won’t be for anything so vulgar as to hide them.”

“Oh you named it—for the pleasure.”

“Yes; but you didn‘t, you don’t, understand what the pleasure may be. There are refinements—!” she more patiently dropped. “I mean of consciousness, of sensation, of appreciation,” she went on. “No,” she sadly insisted—“men *don’t* know. They know in such matters almost nothing but what women show them.”

This was one of the speeches, frequent in her, that, liberally, joyfully, intensely adopted and, in itself, as might be, embraced, drew him again as close to her, and held him as long, as their conditions permitted. “Then that’s exactly why we’ve such an abysmal need of you!”

BOOK THIRD

—I—

The two ladies who, in advance of the Swiss season, had been warned that their design was unconsidered, that the passes wouldn't be clear, nor the air mild, nor the inns open—the two ladies who, characteristically, had braved a good deal of possibly interested remonstrance were finding themselves, as their adventure turned out, wonderfully sustained. It was the judgement of the head-waiters and other functionaries on the Italian lakes that approved itself now as interested; they themselves had been conscious of impatiences, of bolder dreams—at least the younger had; so that one of the things they made out together—making out as they did in endless variety—was that in those operatic palaces of the Villa d'Este, of Cadenabbia, of Pallanza and Stresa, lone women, however re-enforced by a travelling-library of instructive volumes, were apt to be beguiled and undone. Their flights of fancy moreover had been modest; they had for instance risked nothing vital in hoping to make their way by the Brünig. They were making it in fact happily enough as we meet them, and were only wishing that, for the wondrous beauty of the early high-climbing spring, it might have been longer and the places to pause and rest more numerous.

Such at least had been the intimated attitude of Mrs. Stringham, the elder of the companions, who had her own view of the impatiences of the younger, to which, however, she offered an opposition but of the most circuitous. She moved, the admirable Mrs. Stringham, in a fine cloud of observation and suspicion; she was in the position, as she believed, of knowing much more about Milly Theale than Milly herself knew, and yet of having to darken her knowledge as well as make it active. The woman in the world least formed by nature, as she was quite aware, for duplicities and labyrinths, she found herself dedicated to personal subtlety by a new set of circumstances, above all by a new personal relation; had now in fact to recognise that an education in the occult—she could scarce say what to call it—had begun for her the day she left New York with Mildred. She had come on from Boston for that purpose; had seen little of the girl—or rather had seen her but briefly, for Mrs. Stringham, when she saw anything at all, saw much, saw everything—before accepting her proposal; and had accordingly placed herself, by her act, in a boat that she more and more estimated as, humanly speaking, of the biggest, though likewise, no doubt, in many ways, by reason of its size, of the safest. In Boston, the winter before, the young lady in whom we are interested had, on the spot, deeply, yet almost tacitly, appealed to her, dropped into her mind the shy conceit of some assistance, some devotion to render. Mrs. Stringham's little life had often been visited by shy conceits—secret dreams that had fluttered their hour between its narrow walls without, for any great part, so much as mustering courage to look out of its rather dim windows. But this imagination—the fancy of a possible link with the remarkable young thing from New York—*had* mustered courage: had perched, on the instant, at the clearest lookout it could find, and might be said to have remained there till, only a few months later, it[1] had caught, in surprise and joy, the unmistakeable flash of a signal.

Milly Theale had Boston friends, such as they were, and of recent making; and it was understood that her visit to them—a visit that was not to be meagre—had been undertaken, after a series of bereavements, in the interest of the particular peace that New York couldn't give. It was recognised, liberally enough, that there were many things—perhaps even too many—New York *could* give; but this was felt to make no difference in the important truth that what you had most to do, under the discipline of life, or of death, was really to feel your situation as grave. Boston could help you to that as nothing else could, and it had extended to Milly, by every presumption, some such measure of assistance. Mrs. Stringham was never to forget—for the moment had not faded, nor the infinitely fine vibration it set up in any degree ceased—her own first sight of the striking apparition, then unheralded and unexplained: the slim, constantly pale, delicately haggard, anomalously, agreeably angular young person, of not more than two-and-twenty summers, in spite of her marks, whose hair was somehow exceptionally red even for the real thing, which it innocently confessed to being, and whose clothes were remarkably black even for robes of mourning, which was the meaning they expressed. It was New York mourning, it was New York hair, it was a New York history, confused as yet, but multitudinous, of the loss of parents, brothers, sisters, almost every human appendage, all on a scale and with a sweep that had required the greater stage; it was a New York legend of affecting, of romantic isolation, and, beyond everything, it was by most accounts, in respect to the mass of money so piled on the girl's back, a set of New York possibilities. She was alone, she was stricken, she was rich, and in particular was strange—a combination in itself of a nature to engage Mrs. Stringham's attention. But it was the strangeness that most

determined our good lady's sympathy, convinced as she had to be that it was greater than any one else—any one but the sole Susan Stringham—supposed. Susan privately settled it that Boston was not in the least seeing her, was only occupied with her seeing Boston, and that any assumed affinity between the two characters was delusive and vain. She was seeing her, and she had quite the finest moment of her life in now obeying the instinct to conceal the vision. She couldn't explain it—no one would understand. They would say clever Boston things—Mrs. Stringham was from Burlington Vermont, which, she boldly upheld as the real heart of New England, Boston being "too far south"—but they would only darken counsel.

There could be no better proof (than this quick intellectual split) of the impression made on our friend, who shone herself, she was well aware, with but the reflected light of the admirable city. She too had had her discipline, but it had not made her striking; it had been prosaically usual, though doubtless a decent dose; and had only made her usual to match it—usual, that is, as Boston went. She had lost first her husband and then her mother, with whom, on her husband's death, she had lived again; so that now, childless, she was but more sharply single than before. Yet she sat rather coldly light, having, as she called it, enough to live on—so far, that is, as she lived by bread alone: how little indeed she was regularly content with that diet appeared from the name she had made—Susan Shepherd Stringham—as a contributor to the best magazines. She wrote short stories, and she fondly believed she had her "note," the art of showing New England without showing it wholly in the kitchen. She had not herself been brought up in the kitchen; she knew others who had not; and to speak for them had thus become with her a literary mission. To be in truth literary had ever been her dearest thought, the thought that kept her bright little nippers[m] perpetually in position. There were masters, models, celebrities, mainly foreign, whom she finally accounted so and in whose light she ingeniously laboured; there were others whom, however chattered about, she ranked with the inane, for she bristled with discriminations; but all categories failed her—they ceased at least to signify—as soon as she found herself in presence of the real thing, the romantic life itself. That was what she saw in Mildred—what positively made her hand a while tremble too much for the pen. She had had, it seemed to her, a revelation—such as even New England refined and grammatical couldn't give; and, all made up as she was of small neat memories and ingenuities, little industries and ambitions, mixed with something moral, personal, that was still more intensely responsive, she felt her new friend would have done her an ill turn if their friendship shouldn't develop, and yet that nothing would be left of anything else if it should. It was for the surrender of everything else that she was, however, quite prepared, and while she went about her usual Boston business with her usual Boston probity she was really all the while holding herself. She wore her "handsome" felt hat, so Tyrolese, yet somehow, though feathered from the eagle's wing, so truly domestic, with the same straightness and security; she attached her fur boa with the same honest precautions; she preserved her balance on the ice-slopes with the same practised skill; she opened, each evening, her *Transcript*[n] with the same interfusionof suspense and resignation; she attended her almost daily concert with the same expenditure of patience and the same economy of passion; she flitted in and out of the Public Library with the air of conscientiously returning or bravely carrying off in her pocket the key of knowledge itself; and finally—it was what she most did—she watched the thin trickle of a fictive "love-interest" through that somewhat serpentine channel, in the magazines, which she mainly managed to keep clear for it. But the real thing all the while was elsewhere; the real thing had gone back to New York, leaving behind it the two unsolved questions, quite distinct, of why it *was* real, and whether she should ever be so near it again.

For the figure to which these questions attached themselves she had found a convenient description—she thought of it for herself always as that of a girl with a background. The great reality was in the fact that, very soon, after but two or three meetings, the girl with the background, the girl with the crown of old gold and the mourning that was not as the mourning of Boston, but at once more rebellious in its gloom and more frivolous in its frills, had told her she had never seen any one like her. They had met thus as opposed curiosities, and that simple remark of Milly's—if simple it was—became the most important thing that had ever happened to her; it deprived the love-interest, for the time, of actuality and even of pertinence; it moved her first, in short, in a high degree, to gratitude, and then to no small compassion. Yet in respect to this relation at least it was what did prove the key of knowledge; it lighted up as nothing else could do the poor young woman's history. That the potential heiress of all the ages should never have seen any one like a mere typical subscriber, after all, to the *Transcript* was a truth that—in especial as announced with modesty, with humility, with regret—described a situation. It laid upon the elder woman, as to the void to be filled, a weight of responsibility; but in particular it led her to ask whom poor Mildred *had* then seen, and what range of contacts it had taken to produce such queer surprises. That was really the enquiry that had ended by clearing the air: the key of knowledge was felt to click in the lock from the moment it flashed upon Mrs. Stringham that her friend had been starved for culture. Culture was what she herself represented for her, and it was living up to that principle that would surely prove the great business. She knew, the clever lady, what the principle itself represented, and the limits of her own store; and a certain alarm would have grown upon her if something else hadn't grown faster. This was, fortunately for her—and we give it in her own words—the sense of a harrowing pathos. That, primarily, was what appealed to her, what seemed to open the door of romance for her still wider than any, than a still more reckless, connexion with the "picture-papers." For such was

essentially the point: it was rich, romantic, abysmal, to have, as was evident, thousands and thousands a year, to have youth and intelligence and, if not beauty, at least in equal measure a high dim charming ambiguous oddity, which was even better, and then on top of all to enjoy boundless freedom, the freedom of the wind in the desert—it was unspeakably touching to be so equipped and yet to have been reduced by fortune to little humble-minded mistakes.

It brought our friend's imagination back again to New York, where aberrations were so possible in the intellectual sphere, and it in fact caused a visit she presently paid there to overflow with interest. As Milly had beautifully invited her, so she would hold out if she could against the strain of so much confidence in her mind; and the remarkable thing was that even at the end of three weeks she *had* held out. But by this time her mind had grown comparatively bold and free; it was dealing with new quantities, a different proportion altogether—and that had made for refreshment: she had accordingly gone home in convenient possession of her subject. New York was vast, New York was startling, with strange histories, with wild cosmopolite backward generations that accounted for anything; and to have got nearer the luxuriant tribe of which the rare creature was the final flower, the immense extravagant unregulated cluster, with free-living ancestors, handsome dead cousins, lurid uncles, beautiful vanished aunts, persons all busts and curls, preserved, though so exposed, in the marble of famous French chisels—all this, to say nothing of the effect of closer growths of the stem, was to have had one's small world-space both crowded and enlarged. Our couple had at all events effected an exchange; the elder friend had been as consciously intellectual as possible, and the younger, abounding in personal revelation, had been as distinguished. This was poetry—it was also history— Mrs. Stringham thought, to a finer tune even than Maeterlinck and Pater, than Marbot and Gregorovius.[o] She appointed occasions for the reading of these authors with her hostess, rather perhaps than actually achieved great spans; but what they managed and what they missed speedily sank for her into the dim depths of the merely relative, so quickly, so strongly had she clutched her central clue. All her scruples and hesitations, all her anxious enthusiasms, had reduced themselves to a single alarm—the fear that she really might act on her companion clumsily and coarsely. She was positively afraid of what she might do to her, and to avoid that, to avoid it with piety and passion, to do, rather, nothing at all, to leave her untouched because no touch one could apply, however light, however just, however earnest and anxious, would be half good enough, would be anything but an ugly smutch upon perfection—this now imposed itself as a consistent, an inspiring thought.

Less than a month after the event that had so determined Mrs. Stringham's attitude—close upon the heels, that is, of her return from New York—she was reached by a proposal that brought up for her the kind of question her delicacy might have to contend with. Would she start for Europe with her young friend at the earliest possible date, and should she be willing to do so without making conditions? The enquiry was launched by wire; explanations, in sufficiency, were promised; extreme urgency was suggested and a general surrender invited. It was to the honour of her sincerity that she made the surrender on the spot, though it was not perhaps altogether to that of her logic. She had wanted, very consciously, from the first, to give something up for her new acquaintance, but she had now no doubt that she was practically giving up all. What settled this was the fulness of a particular impression, the impression that had throughout more and more supported her and which she would have uttered so far as she might by saying that the charm of the creature was positively in the creature's greatness.

She would have been content so to leave it; unless indeed she had said, more familiarly, that Mildred was the biggest impression of her life. That was at all events the biggest account of her, and none but a big clearly would do. Her situation, as such things were called, was on the grand scale; but it still was not that. It was her nature, once for all—a nature that reminded Mrs. Stringham of the term always used in the newspapers about the great new steamers, the inordinate number of "feet of water" they drew; so that if, in your little boat, you had chosen to hover and approach, you had but yourself to thank, when once motion was started, for the way the draught pulled you. Milly drew the feet of water, and odd though it might seem that a lonely girl, who was not robust and who hated sound and show, should stir the stream like a leviathan, her companion floated off with the sense of rocking violently at her side. More than prepared, however, for that excitement, Mrs. Stringham mainly failed of ease in respect to her own consistency. To attach herself for an indefinite time seemed a roundabout way of holding her hands off. If she wished to be sure of neither touching nor smutching, the straighter plan would doubtless have been not to keep her friend within reach. This in fact she fully recognised, and with it the degree to which she desired that the girl should lead her life, a life certain to be so much finer than that of anybody else. The difficulty, however, by good fortune, cleared away as soon as she had further recognised, as she was speedily able to do, that she Susan Shepherd—the name with which Milly for the most part amused herself—was *not* anybody else. She had renounced that character; she had now no life to lead; and she honestly believed that she was thus supremely equipped for leading Milly's own. No other person whatever, she was sure, had to an equal degree this qualification, and it was really to assert it that she fondly embarked.

Many things, though not in many weeks, had come and gone since then, and one of the best of them doubtless had been the voyage itself, by the happy southern course, to the succession of Mediterranean ports,

with the dazzled wind-up at Naples. Two or three others had preceded this; incidents, indeed rather lively marks, of their last fortnight at home, and one of which had determined on Mrs. Stringham's part a rush to New York, forty-eight breathless hours there, previous to her final rally. But the great sustained sea-light had drunk up the rest of the picture, so that for many days other questions and other possibilities sounded with as little effect as a trio of penny whistles might sound in a Wagner overture. It was the Wagner overture that practically prevailed, up through Italy, where Milly had already been, still further up and across the Alps, which were also partly known to Mrs. Stringham; only perhaps "taken" to a time not wholly congruous, hurried in fact on account of the girl's high restlessness. She had been expected, she had frankly promised, to be restless—that was partly why she was "great"—or was a consequence, at any rate, if not a cause; yet she had not perhaps altogether announced herself as straining so hard at the cord. It was familiar, it was beautiful to Mrs. Stringham that she had arrears to make up, the chances that had lapsed for her through the wanton ways of forefathers fond of Paris, but not of its higher sides, and fond almost of nothing else; but the vagueness, the openness, the eagerness without point and the interest without pause—all a part of the charm of her oddity as at first presented—had become more striking in proportion as they triumphed over movement and change. She had arts and idiosyncrasies of which no great account could have been given, but which were a daily grace if you lived with them; such as the art of being almost tragically impatient and yet making it as light as air; of being inexplicably sad and yet making it as clear as noon; of being unmistakeably gay and yet making it as soft as dusk. Mrs. Stringham by this time understood everything, was more than ever confirmed in wonder and admiration, in her view that it was life enough simply to feel her companion's feelings; but there were special keys she had not yet added to her bunch, impressions that of a sudden were apt to affect her as new.

This particular day on the great Swiss road had been, for some reason, full of them, and they referred themselves, provisionally, to some deeper depth than she had touched—though into two or three such depths, it must be added, she had peeped long enough to find herself suddenly draw back. It was not Milly's unpacified state, in short, that now troubled her—though certainly, as Europe was the great American sedative, the failure was to some extent to be noted: it was the suspected presence of something behind the state—which, however, could scarcely have taken its place there since their departure. What a fresh motive of unrest could suddenly have sprung from was in short not to be divined. It was but half an explanation to say that excitement, for each of them, had naturally dropped, and that what they had left behind, or tried to—the great serious facts of life, as Mrs. Stringham liked to call them—was once more coming into sight as objects loom through smoke when smoke begins to clear; for these were general appearances from which the girl's own aspect, her really larger vagueness, seemed rather to disconnect itself. The nearest approach to a personal anxiety indulged in as yet by the elder lady was on her taking occasion to wonder if what she had more than anything else got hold of mightn't be one of the finer, one of the finest, one of the rarest—as she called it so that she might call it nothing worse—cases of American intensity. She had just had a moment of alarm—asked herself if her young friend were merely going to treat her to some complicated drama of nerves. At the end of a week, however, with their further progress, her young friend had effectively answered the question and given her the impression, indistinct indeed as yet, of something that had a reality compared with which the nervous explanation would have been coarse. Mrs. Stringham found herself from that hour, in other words, in presence of an explanation that remained a muffled and intangible form, but that assuredly, should it take on sharpness, would explain everything and more than everything, would become instantly the light in which Milly was to be read.

Such a matter as this may at all events speak of the style in which our young woman could affect those who were near her, may testify to the sort of interest she could inspire. She worked—and seemingly quite without design—upon the sympathy, the curiosity, the fancy of her associates, and we shall really ourselves scarce otherwise come closer to her than by feeling their impression and sharing, if need be, their confusion.[8] She reduced them, Mrs. Stringham would have said, to a consenting bewilderment; which was precisely, for that good lady, on a last analysis, what was most in harmony with her greatness. She exceeded, escaped measure, was surprising only because *they* were so far from great. Thus it was that on this wondrous day by the Brünig the spell of watching her had grown more than ever irresistible; a proof of what—or of a part of what—Mrs. Stringham had, with all the rest, been reduced to. She had almost the sense of tracking her young friend as if at a given moment to pounce. She knew she shouldn't pounce, she hadn't come out to pounce; yet she felt her attention secretive, all the same, and her observation scientific. She struck herself as hovering like a spy, applying tests, laying traps, concealing signs. This would last, however, only till she should fairly know what was the matter; and to watch was after all, meanwhile, a way of clinging to the girl, not less than an occupation, a satisfaction in itself. The pleasure of watching moreover, if a reason were needed, came from a sense of her beauty. Her beauty hadn't at all originally seemed a part of the situation, and Mrs. Stringham had even in the first flush of friendship not named it grossly to any one; having seen early that for stupid people—and who, she sometimes secretly asked herself, wasn't stupid?—it would take a great deal of explaining. She had learned not to mention it till it was mentioned first—which occasionally happened, but not too often; and then she was there in force. Then she both warmed to the perception that met her own perception, and

disputed it, suspiciously, as to special items; while, in general, she had learned to refine even to the point of herself employing the word that most people employed. She employed it to pretend she was also stupid and so have done with the matter; spoke of her friend as plain, as ugly even, in a case of especially dense insistence; but as, in appearance, so “awfully full of things.” This was her own way of describing a face that, thanks doubtless to rather too much forehead, too much nose and too much mouth, together with too little mere conventional colour and conventional line, was expressive, irregular, exquisite, both for speech and for silence. When Milly smiled it was a public event—when she didn’t it was a chapter of history. They had stopped on the Brünig for luncheon, and there had come up for them under the charm of the place the question of a longer stay.

Mrs. Stringham was now on the ground of thrilled recognitions, small sharp echoes of a past which she kept in a well-thumbed case, but which, on pressure of a spring and exposure to the air, still showed itself ticking as hard as an honest old watch. The embalmed “Europe” of her younger time had partly stood for three years of Switzerland, a term of continuous school at Vevey, with rewards of merit in the form of silver medals tied by blue ribbons and mild mountain-passes attacked with alpenstocks. It was the good girls who, in the holidays, were taken highest, and our friend could now judge, from what she supposed her familiarity with the minor peaks, that she had been one of the best. These reminiscences, sacred to-day because prepared in the hushed chambers of the past, had been part of the general train laid for the pair of sisters, daughters early fatherless, by their brave Vermont mother, who struck her at present as having apparently, almost like Columbus, worked out, all unassisted, a conception of the other side of the globe. She had focussed Vevey, by the light of nature and with extraordinary completeness, at Burlington; after which she had embarked, sailed, landed, explored and, above all, made good her presence. She had given her daughters the five years in Switzerland and Germany that were to leave them ever afterwards a standard of comparison for all cycles of Cathay,[p] and to stamp the younger in especial—Susan was the younger—with a character, that, as Mrs. Stringham had often had occasion, through life, to say to herself, made all the difference. It made all the difference for Mrs. Stringham, over and over again and in the most remote connexions, that, thanks to her parent’s lonely thrifty hardy faith, she was a woman of the world. There were plenty of women who were all sorts of things that she wasn’t, but who, on the other hand, were not that, and who didn’t know *she* was (which she liked—it relegated them still further) and didn’t know either how it enabled her to judge them. She had never seen herself so much in this light as during the actual phase of her associated, if slightly undirected, pilgrimage; and the consciousness gave perhaps to her plea for a pause more intensity than she knew. The irrecoverable days had come back to her from far off; they were part of the sense of the cool upper air and of everything else that hung like an indestructible scent to the torn garment of youth—the taste of honey and the luxury of milk, the sound of cattle-bells and the rush of streams, the fragrance of trodden balms and the dizziness of deep gorges.

Milly clearly felt these things too, but they affected her companion at moments—that was quite the way Mrs. Stringham would have expressed it—as the princess in a conventional tragedy might have affected the confidant if a personal emotion had ever been permitted to the latter. That a princess could only be a princess was a truth with which, essentially, a confidant, however responsive, had to live. Mrs. Stringham was a woman of the world, but Milly Theale was a princess, the only one she had yet had to deal with, and this, in its way too, made all the difference. It was a perfectly definite doom for the wearer—it was for every one else an office nobly filled. It might have represented possibly, with its involved loneliness and other mysteries, the weight under which she fancied her companion’s admirable head occasionally, and ever so submissively, bowed. Milly had quite assented at luncheon to their staying over, and had left her to look at rooms, settle questions, arrange about their keeping on their carriage and horses; cares that had now moreover fallen to Mrs. Stringham as a matter of course and that yet for some reason, on this occasion particularly, brought home to her—all agreeably, richly, almost grandly—what it was to live with the great. Her young friend had in a sublime degree a sense closed to the general question of difficulty, which she got rid of furthermore not in the least as one had seen many charming persons do, by merely passing it on to others. She kept it completely at a distance: it never entered the circle; the most plaintive confidant couldn’t have dragged it in; and to tread the path of a confidant was accordingly to live exempt. Service was in other words so easy to render that the whole thing was like court life without the hardships. It came back of course to the question of money, and our observant lady had by this time repeatedly reflected that if one were talking of the “difference,” it was just this, this incomparably and nothing else, that when all was said and done most made it. A less vulgarly, a less obviously purchasing or parading person she couldn’t have imagined; but it prevailed even as the truth of truths that the girl couldn’t get away from her wealth. She might leave her conscientious companion as freely alone with it as possible and never ask a question, scarce even tolerate a reference; but it was in the fine folds of the helplessly expensive little black frock that she drew over the grass as she now strolled vaguely off; it was in the curious and splendid coils of hair, “done” with no eye whatever to the *mode du jour*,[q] that peeped from under the corresponding indifference of her hat, the merely personal tradition that suggested a sort of noble inelegance; it lurked between the leaves of the uncut but antiquated Tauchnitz[r] volume of which, before going out, she had mechanically possessed herself. She couldn’t dress it away, nor walk it away, nor read it

away, nor think it away; she could neither smile it away in any dreamy absence nor blow it away in any softened sigh. She couldn't have lost it if she had tried—that was what it was to be really rich. It had to be *the* thing you were. When at the end of an hour she hadn't returned to the house Mrs. Stringham, though the bright afternoon was yet young, took, with precautions, the same direction, went to join her in case of her caring for a walk. But the purpose of joining her was in truth less distinct than that of a due regard for a possibly preferred detachment: so that, once more, the good lady proceeded with a quietness that made her slightly "underhand" even in her own eyes. She couldn't help that, however, and she didn't care, sure as she was that what she really wanted wasn't to overstep but to stop in time. It was to be able to stop in time that she went softly, but she had on this occasion further to go than ever yet, for she followed in vain, and at last with some anxiety, the footpath she believed Milly to have taken. It wound up a hillside and into the higher Alpine meadows in which, all these last days, they had so often wanted, as they passed above or below, to stray; and then it obscured itself in a wood, but always going up, up, and with a small cluster of brown old high-perched chalets evidently for its goal. Mrs. Stringham reached in due course the chalets, and there received from a bewildered old woman, a very fearful person to behold, an indication that sufficiently guided her. The young lady had been seen not long before passing further on, over a crest and to a place where the way would drop again, as our unappeased enquirer found it in fact, a quarter of an hour later, markedly and almost alarmingly to do. It led somewhere, yet apparently quite into space, for the great side of the mountain appeared, from where she pulled up, to fall away altogether, though probably but to some issue below and out of sight. Her uncertainty moreover was brief, for she next became aware of the presence on a fragment of rock, twenty yards off, of the Tauchnitz volume the girl had brought out and that therefore pointed to her shortly previous passage. She had rid herself of the book, which was an encumbrance, and meant of course to pick it up on her return; but as she hadn't yet picked it up what on earth had become of her? Mrs. Stringham, I hasten to add,[9] was within a few moments to see; but it was quite an accident that she hadn't, before they were over, betrayed by her deeper agitation the fact of her own nearness.

The whole place, with the descent of the path and as a sequel to a sharp turn that was masked by rocks and shrubs, appeared to fall precipitously and to become a "view" pure and simple, a view of great extent and beauty, but thrown forward and vertiginous. Milly, with the promise of it from just above, had gone straight down to it, not stopping till it was all before her; and here, on what struck her friend as the dizzy edge of it, she was seated at her ease. The path somehow took care of itself and its final business, but the girl's seat was a slab of rock at the end of a short promontory or excrescence that merely pointed off to the right at gulfs of air and that was so placed by good fortune, if not by the worst, as to be at last completely visible. For Mrs. Stringham stifled a cry on taking in what she believed to be the danger of such a perch for a mere maiden; her liability to slip, to slide, to leap, to be precipitated by a single false movement, by a turn of the head—how could one tell?—into whatever was beneath. A thousand thoughts, for the minute, roared in the poor lady's ears, but without reaching, as happened, Milly's. It was a commotion that left our observer intensely still and holding her breath. What had first been offered her was the possibility of a latent intention—however wild the idea—in such a posture; of some betrayed accordance of Milly's caprice with a horrible hidden obsession. But since Mrs. Stringham stood as motionless as if a sound, a syllable, must have produced the start that would be fatal, so even the lapse of a few seconds had partly a reassuring effect. It gave her time to receive the impression which, when she some minutes later softly retraced her steps, was to be the sharpest she carried away. This was the impression that if the girl was deeply and recklessly meditating there she wasn't meditating a jump; she was on the contrary, as she sat, much more in a state of uplifted and unlimited possession that had nothing to gain from violence. She was looking down on the kingdoms of the earth, and though indeed that of itself might well go to the brain, it wouldn't be with a view of renouncing them. Was she choosing among them or did she want them all? This question, before Mrs. Stringham had decided what to do, made others vain; in accordance with which she saw, or believed she did, that if it might be dangerous to call out, to sound in any way a surprise, it would probably be safe enough to withdraw as she had come. She watched a while longer, she held her breath, and she never knew afterwards what time had elapsed.

Not many minutes probably, yet they hadn't seemed few, and they had given her so much to think of, not only while creeping home, but while waiting afterwards at the inn, that she was still busy with them when, late in the afternoon, Milly reappeared. She had stopped at the point of the path where the Tauchnitz lay, had taken it up and, with the pencil attached to her watch-guard, had scrawled a word—*à bientôt!*[s]—across the cover; after which, even under the girl's continued delay, she had measured time without a return of alarm. For she now saw that the great thing she had brought away was precisely a conviction that the future wasn't to exist for her princess in the form of any sharp or simple release from the human predicament. It wouldn't be for her a question of a flying leap and thereby of a quick escape. It would be a question of taking full in the face the whole assault of life, to the general muster of which indeed her face might have been directly presented as she sat there on her rock. Mrs. Stringham was thus able to say to herself during still another wait of some length that if her young friend still continued absent it wouldn't be because—what-everthe opportunity—she had cut short the thread. She wouldn't have committed suicide; she knew herself unmistakeably reserved for some more complicated passage; this was the very vision in which she had, with

no little awe, been discovered. The image that thus remained with the elder lady kept the character of a revelation. During the breathless minutes of her watch she had seen her companion afresh; the latter's type, aspect, marks, her history, her state, her beauty, her mystery, all unconsciously betrayed themselves to the Alpine air, and all had been gathered in again to feed Mrs. Stringham's flame. They are things that will more distinctly appear for us, and they are meanwhile briefly represented by the enthusiasm that was stronger on our friend's part than any doubt. It was a consciousness she was scarce yet used to carrying, but she had as beneath her feet a mine of something precious. She seemed to herself to stand near the mouth, not yet quite cleared. The mine but needed working and would certainly yield a treasure. She wasn't thinking, either, of Milly's gold.

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The girl said nothing, when they met, about the words scrawled on the Tauchnitz, and Mrs. Stringham then noticed that she hadn't the book with her. She had left it lying and probably would never remember it at all. Her comrade's decision was therefore quickly made not to speak of having followed her; and within five minutes of her return, wonderfully enough, the preoccupation denoted by her forgetfulness further declared itself. "Should you think me quite abominable if I were to say that after all-?"

Mrs. Stringham had already thought, with the first sound of the question, everything she was capable of thinking, and had immediately made such a sign that Milly's words gave place to visible relief at her assent. "You don't care for our stop here—you'd rather go straight on? We'll start then with the peep of tomorrow's dawn—or as early as you like; it's only rather late now to take the road again." And she smiled to show how she meant it for a joke that an instant onward rush was what the girl would have wished. "I bullied you into stopping," she added; "so it serves me right."

Milly made in general the most of her good friend's jokes; but she humoured this one a little absently. "Oh yes, you do bully me." And it was thus arranged between them, with no discussion at all, that they would resume their journey in the morning. The younger tourist's interest in the detail of the matter—in spite of a declaration from the elder that she would consent to be dragged anywhere—appeared almost immediately afterwards quite to lose itself; she promised, however, to think till supper of where, with the world all before them, they might go—supper having been ordered for such time as permitted of lighted candles. It had been agreed between them that lighted candles at wayside inns, in strange countries, amid mountain scenery, gave the evening meal a peculiar poetry—such being the mild adventures, the refinements of impression, that they, as they would have said, went in for. It was now as if, before this repast, Milly had designed to "lie down"; but at the end of three minutes more she wasn't lying down, she was saying instead, abruptly, with a transition that was like a jump of four thousand miles: "What was it that, in New York, on the ninth, when you saw him alone, Doctor Finch said to you?"

It was not till later that Mrs. Stringham fully knew why the question had startled her still more than its suddenness explained; though the effect of it even at the moment was almost to frighten her into a false answer. She had to think, to remember the occasion, the "ninth," in New York, the time she had seen Doctor Finch alone, and to recall the words he had then uttered; and when everything had come back it was quite, at first, for a moment, as if he had said something that immensely mattered. He hadn't, however, in fact; it was only as if he might perhaps after all have been going to. It was on the sixth—within ten days of their sailing—that she had hurried from Boston under the alarm, a small but a sufficient shock, of hearing that Mildred had suddenly been taken ill, had had, from some obscure cause, such an upset as threatened to stay their journey. The bearing of the accident had happily soon presented itself as slight, and there had been in the event but a few hours of anxiety; the journey had been pronounced again not only possible, but, as representing "change," highly advisable; and if the zealous guest had had five minutes by herself with the Doctor this was clearly no more at his insistence than at her own. Almost nothing had passed between them but an easy exchange of enthusiasms in respect to the remedial properties of "Europe"; and due assurance, as the facts came back to her, she was now able to give. "Nothing whatever, on my word of honour, that you mayn't know or mightn't then have known. I've no secret with him about you. What makes you suspect it? I don't quite make out how you know I did see him alone."

"No—you never told me," said Milly. "And I don't mean," she went on, "during the twenty-four hours while I was bad, when your putting your heads together was natural enough. I mean after I was better—the last thing before you went home."

Mrs. Stringham continued to wonder. "Who told you I saw him then?"

"He didn't himself—nor did you write me it afterwards. We speak of it now for the first time. That's exactly

why!" Milly declared—with something in her face and voice that, the next moment, betrayed for her companion that she had really known nothing, had only conjectured and, chancing her charge, made a hit. Yet why had her mind been busy with the question? "But if you're not, as you now assure me, in his confidence," she smiled, "it's no matter."

"I'm not in his confidence—he had nothing to confide. But are you feeling unwell?"

The elder woman was earnest for the truth, though the possibility she named was not at all the one that seemed to fit—witness the long climb Milly had just indulged in. The girl showed her constant white face, but this her friends had all learned to discount, and it was often brightest when superficially not bravest. She continued for a little mysteriously to smile. "I don't know—haven't really the least idea. But it might be well to find out."

Mrs. Stringham at this flared into sympathy. "Are you in trouble—in pain?"

"Not the least little bit. But I sometimes wonder—!"

"Yes"—she pressed: "wonder what?"

"Well, if I shall have much of it."

Mrs. Stringham stared. "Much of what? Not of pain?"

"Of everything. Of everything I have."

Anxiously again, tenderly, our friend cast about. "You 'have' everything; so that when you say 'much' of it —"

"I only mean," the girl broke in, "shall I have it for long? That is if I *have* got it."

She had at present the effect, a little, of confounding, or at least of perplexing her comrade, who was touched, who was always touched, by something helpless in her grace and abrupt in her turns, and yet actually half made out in her a sort of mocking light. "If you've got an ailment?"

"If I've got everything," Milly laughed.

"Ah *that*—like almost nobody else."

"Then for how long?"

Mrs. Stringham's eyes entreated her; she had gone close to her, half-enclosed her with urgent arms. "Do you want to see some one?" And then as the girl only met it with a slow headshake, though looking perhaps a shade more conscious: "We'll go straight to the best near doctor." This too, however, produced but a gaze of qualified assent and a silence, sweet and vague, that left everything open. Our friend decidedly lost herself. "Tell me, for God's sake, if you're in distress."

"I don't think I've really *everything,"* Milly said as if to explain—and as if also to put it pleasantly.

"But what on earth can I do for you?"

The girl debated, then seemed on the point of being able to say; but suddenly changed and expressed herself otherwise. "Dear, dear thing—I'm only too happy!"

It brought them closer, but it rather confirmed Mrs. Stringham's doubt. "Then what's the matter?"

"That's the matter—that I can scarcely bear it."

"But what is it you think you haven't got?"

Milly waited another moment; then she found it, and found for it a dim show of joy. "The power to resist the bliss of what I *have!"*

Mrs. Stringham took it in—her sense of being "put off" with it, the possible, probable irony of it—and her tenderness renewed itself in the positive grimness of a long murmur. "Whom will you see?"—for it was as if they looked down from their height at a continent of doctors. "Where will you first go?"

Milly had for the third time her air of consideration; but she came back with it to her plea of some minutes before. "I'll tell you at supper—good-bye till then." And she left the room with a lightness that testified for her companion to something that again particularly pleased her in the renewed promise of motion. The odd passage just concluded, Mrs. Stringham mused as she once more sat alone with a hooked needle and a ball of silk, the "fine" work with which she was always provided—this mystifying mood had simply been precipitated, no doubt, by their prolonged halt, with which the girl hadn't really been in sympathy. One had only to admit that her complaint was in fact but the excess of the joy of life, and everything *did* then fit. She

couldn't stop for the joy, but she could go on for it, and with the pulse of her going on she floated again, was restored to her great spaces. There was no evasion of any truth—so at least Susan Shepherd hoped—in one's sitting there while the twilight deepened and feeling still more finely that the position of this young lady was magnificent. The evening at that height had naturally turned to cold, and the travellers had bespoken a fire with their meal; the great Alpine road asserted its brave presence through the small panes of the low clean windows, with incidents at the inn-door, the yellow diligence,[t] the great waggons, the hurrying hooded private conveyances, reminders, for our fanciful friend, of old stories, old pictures, historic flights, escapes, pursuits, things that had happened, things indeed that by a sort of strange congruity helped her to read the meanings of the greatest interest into the relation in which she was now so deeply involved. It was natural that this record of the magnificence of her companion's position should strike her as after all the best meaning she could extract; for she herself was seated in the magnificence as in a court-carriage—she came back to that, and such a method of progression, such a view from crimson cushions, would evidently have a great deal more to give. By the time the candles were lighted for supper and the short white curtains drawn Milly had reappeared, and the little scenic room had then all its romance. That charm moreover was far from broken by the words in which she, without further loss of time, satisfied her patient mate. "I want to go straight to London."

It was unexpected, corresponding with no view positively taken at their departure; when England had appeared, on the contrary, rather relegated and postponed—seen for the moment, as who should say, at the end of an avenue of preparations and introductions. London, in short, might have been supposed to be the crown, and to be achieved, like a siege, by gradual approaches. Milly's actual fine stride was therefore the more exciting, as any simplification almost always was to Mrs. Stringham; who, besides, was afterwards to recall as a piece of that very "exposition" dear to the dramatist the terms in which, between their smoky candles, the girl had put her preference and in which still other things had come up, come while the clank of waggon-chains in the sharp air reached their ears, with the stamp of hoofs, the rattle of buckets and the foreign questions, foreign answers, that were all alike a part of the cheery converse of the road. The girl brought it out in truth as she might have brought a huge confession, something she admitted herself shy about and that would seem to show her as frivolous; it had rolled over her that what she wanted of Europe was "people," so far as they were to be had, and that, if her friend really wished to know, the vision of this same equivocal quantity was what had haunted her during their previous days, in museums and churches, and what was again spoiling for her the pure taste of scenery. She was all for scenery—yes; but she wanted it human and personal, and all she could say was that there would be in London—wouldn't there?—more of that kind than anywhere else. She came back to her idea that if it wasn't for long—if nothing should happen to be so for *her*—why the particular thing she spoke of would probably have most to give her in the time, would probably be less than anything else a waste of her remainder. She produced this last consideration indeed with such gaiety that Mrs. Stringham was not again disconcerted by it, was in fact quite ready—if talk of early dying was in order—to match it from her own future. Good, then; they would eat and drink because of what might happen to-morrow; and they would direct their course from that moment with a view to such eating and drinking. They ate and drank that night, in truth, as in the spirit of this decision; whereby the air, before they separated, felt itself the clearer.

It had cleared perhaps to a view only too extensive—extensive, that is, in proportion to the signs of life presented. The idea of "people" was not so entertained on Milly's part as to connect itself with particular persons, and the fact remained for each of the ladies that they would, completely unknown, disembark at Dover amid the completely unknowing. They had no relation already formed; this plea Mrs. Stringham put forward to see what it would produce. It produced nothing at first but the observation on the girl's side that what she had in mind was no thought of society nor of scraping acquaintance; nothing was further from her than to desire the opportunities represented for the compatriot in general by a trunkful of "letters." It wasn't a question, in short, of the people the compatriot was after; it was the human, the English picture itself, as they might see it in their own way—the concrete world inferred so fondly, from what one had read and dreamed. Mrs. Stringham did every justice to this concrete world, but when later on an occasion chanced to present itself she made a point of not omitting to remark that it might be a comfort to know in advance one or two of the human particles of its concretion. This still, however, failed, in vulgar parlance, to "fetch" Milly, so that she had presently to go all the way. "Haven't I understood from you, for that matter, that you gave Mr. Densher something of a promise?"

There was a moment, on this, when Milly's look had to be taken as representing one of two things—either that she was completely vague about the promise or that Mr. Densher's name itself started no train. But she really couldn't be so vague about the promise, the partner of these hours quickly saw, without attaching it to something; it had to be a promise to somebody in particular to be so repudiated. In the event, accordingly, she acknowledged Mr. Merton Densher, the so unusually "bright" young Englishman who had made his appearance in New York on some special literary business—wasn't it?—shortly before their departure, and who had been three or four times in her house during the brief period between her visit to Boston and her companion's subsequent stay with her; but she required much reminding before it came back to her that she

had mentioned to this companion just afterwards the confidence expressed by the personage in question in her never doing so dire a thing as to come to London without, as the phrase was, looking a fellow up. She had left him the enjoyment of his confidence, the form of which might have appeared a trifle free—this she now reasserted; she had done nothing either to impair or to enhance it; but she had also left Mrs. Stringham, in the connexion and at the time, rather sorry to have missed Mr. Densher. She had thought of him again after that, the elder woman; she had likewise gone so far as to notice that Milly appeared not to have done so—which the girl might easily have betrayed; and, interested as she was in everything that concerned her, she had made out for herself, for herself only and rather idly, that, but for interruptions, the young Englishman might have become a better acquaintance. His being an acquaintance at all was one of the signs that in the first days had helped to place Milly, as a young person with the world before her, for sympathy and wonder. Isolated, unmothered, unguarded, but with her other strong marks, her big house, her big fortune, her big freedom, she had lately begun to "receive," for all her few years, as an older woman might have done—as was done, precisely, by princesses who had public considerations to observe and who came of age very early. If it was thus distinct to Mrs. Stringham then that Mr. Densher had gone off somewhere else in connexion with his errand before her visit to New York, it had been also not undiscoverable that he had come back for a day or two later on, that is after her own second excursion—that he had in fine reappeared on a single occasion on his way to the West: his way from Washington as she believed, though he was out of sight at the time of her joining her friend for their departure. It hadn't occurred to her before to exaggerate—it had not occurred to her that she could; but she seemed to become aware to-night that there had been just enough in this relation to meet, to provoke, the free conception of a little more.

She presently put it that, at any rate, promise or no promise, Milly would at a pinch be able, in London, to act on his permission to make him a sign; to which Milly replied with readiness that her ability, though evident, would be none the less quite wasted, inasmuch as the gentleman would to a certainty be still in America. He had a great deal to do there—which he would scarce have begun; and in fact she might very well not have thought of London at all if she hadn't been sure he wasn't yet near coming back. It was perceptible to her companion that the moment our young woman had so far committed herself she had a sense of having overstepped; which was not quite patched up by her saying the next minute, possibly with a certain failure of presence of mind, that the last thing she desired was the air of running after him. Mrs. Stringham wondered privately what question there could be of any such appearance—the danger of which thus suddenly came up; but she said for the time nothing of it—she only said other things: one of which was, for instance, that if Mr. Densher was away he was away, and this the end of it: also that of course they must be discreet at any price. But what was the measure of discretion, and how was one to be sure? So it was that, as they sat there, she produced her own case: *she* had a possible tie with London, which she desired as little to disown as she might wish to risk presuming on it. She treated her companion, in short, for their evening's end, to the story of Maud Manningham, the odd but interesting English girl who had formed her special affinity in the old days at the Vevey school; whom she had written to, after their separation, with a regularity that had at first faltered and then altogether failed, yet that had been for the time quite a fine case of crude constancy; so that it had in fact flickered up again of itself on the occasion of the marriage of each. They had then once more fondly, scrupulously written—Mrs. Lowder first; and even another letter or two had afterwards passed. This, however, had been the end—though with no rupture, only a gentle drop: Maud Manningham had made, she believed, a great marriage, while she herself had made a small; on top of which, moreover, distance, difference, diminished community and impossible reunion had done the rest of the work. It was but after all these years that reunion had begun to show as possible—if the other party to it, that is, should be still in existence. That was exactly what it now appeared to our friend interesting to ascertain, as, with one aid and another, she believed she might. It was an experiment she would at all events now make if Milly didn't object.

Milly in general objected to nothing, and though she asked a question or two she raised no present plea. Her questions—or at least her own answers to them—kindled on Mrs. Stringham's part a backward train: she hadn't known till to-night how much she remembered, or how fine it might be to see what had become of large high-coloured Maud, florid, alien, exotic—which had been just the spell—even to the perceptions of youth. There was the danger—she frankly touched it—that such a temperament mightn't have matured, with the years, all in the sense of fineness: it was the sort of danger that, in renewing relations after long breaks, one had always to look in the face. To gather in strayed threads was to take a risk—for which, however, she was prepared if Milly was. The possible "fun," she confessed, was by itself rather tempting; and she fairly sounded, with this—wound up a little as she was—the note of fun as the harmless final right of fifty years of mere New England virtue. Among the things she was afterwards to recall was the indescribable look dropped on her, at that, by her companion; she was still seated there between the candles and before the finished supper, while Milly moved about, and the look was long to figure for her as an inscrutable comment on her notion of freedom. Challenged, at any rate, as for the last wise word, Milly showed perhaps, musingly, charmingly, that, though her attention had been mainly soundless, her friend's story—produced as a resource unsuspected, a card from up the sleeve—half-surprised, half-beguiled her. Since the matter, such as it was, depended on that, she brought out before she went to bed an easy, a light "Risk everything!"

This quality in it seemed possibly a little to deny weight to Maud Lowder's evoked presence—as Susan Stringham, still sitting up, became, in excited reflexion, a trifle more conscious. Something determinant, when the girl had left her, took place in her—nameless but, as soon as she had given way, coercive. It was as if she knew again, in this fulness of time, that she had been, after Maud's marriage, just sensibly outlived or, as people nowadays said, shunted. Mrs. Lowder had left her behind, and on the occasion, subsequently, of the corresponding date in her own life—not the second, the sad one, with its dignity of sadness, but the first, with the meagreness of its supposed felicity—she had been, in the same spirit, almost patronisingly pitied. If that suspicion, even when it had ceased to matter, had never quite died out for her, there was doubtless some oddity in its now offering itself as a link, rather than as another break, in the chain; and indeed there might well have been for her a mood in which the notion of the development of patronage in her quondam[u] schoolmate would have settled her question in another sense. It was actually settled—if the case be worth our analysis—by the happy consummation, the poetic justice, the generous revenge, of her having at last something to show. Maud, on their parting company, had appeared to have so much, and would now—for wasn't it also in general quite the rich law of English life?—have, with accretions, promotions, expansions, ever so much more. Very good; such things might be; she rose to the sense of being ready for them. Whatever Mrs. Lowder might have to show—and one hoped one did the presumptions all justice—she would have nothing like Milly Theale, who constituted the trophy producible by poor Susan. Poor Susan lingered late—till the candles were low, and as soon as the table was cleared she opened her neat portfolio. She hadn't lost the old clue; there were connexions she remembered, addresses she could try; so the thing was to begin. She wrote on the spot.

BOOK FOURTH

—I—

It had all gone so fast after this that Milly uttered but the truth nearest to hand in saying to the gentleman on her right—who was, by the same token, the gentleman on her hostess's left—that she scarce even then knew where she was: the words marking her first full sense of a situation really romantic. They were already dining, she and her friend, at Lancaster Gate, and surrounded, as it seemed to her, with every English accessory; though her consciousness of Mrs. Lowder's existence, and still more of her remarkable identity, had been of so recent and so sudden a birth. Susie, as she was apt to call her companion for a lighter change, had only had to wave a neat little wand for the fairy-tale to begin at once; in consequence of which Susie now glittered—for, with Mrs. Stringham's new sense of success, it came to that—in the character of a fairy godmother. Milly had almost insisted on dressing her, for the present occasion, as one; and it was no fault of the girl's if the good lady hadn't now appeared in a peaked hat, a short petticoat and diamond shoe-buckles, brandishing the magic crutch. The good lady bore herself in truth not less contentedly than if these insignia had marked her work; and Milly's observation to Lord Mark had doubtless just been the result of such a light exchange of looks with her as even the great length of the table couldn't baffle. There were twenty persons between them, but this sustained passage was the sharpest sequel yet to that other comparison of views during the pause on the Swiss pass. It almost appeared to Milly that their fortune had been unduly precipitated—as if properly they were in the position of having ventured on a small joke and found the answer out of proportion grave. She couldn't at this moment for instance have said whether, with her quickened perceptions, she were more enlivened or oppressed; and the case might in fact have been serious hadn't she, by good fortune, from the moment the picture loomed, quickly made up her mind that what finally most concerned her was neither to seek nor to shirk, wasn't even to wonder too much, but was to let things come as they would, since there was little enough doubt of how they would go.

Lord Mark had been brought to her before dinner—not by Mrs. Lowder, but by the handsome girl, that lady's niece, who was now at the other end and on the same side as Susie; he had taken her in, and she meant presently to ask him about Miss Croy, the handsome girl, actually offered to her sight—though now in a splendid way—but for the second time. The first time had been the occasion—only three days before—of her calling at their hotel with her aunt and then making, for our other two heroines, a great impression of beauty and eminence. This impression had remained so with Milly that at present, and although her attention was aware at the same time of everything else, her eyes were mainly engaged with Kate Croy when not engaged with Susie. That wonderful creature's eyes moreover readily met them—she ranked now as a wonderful creature; and it seemed part of the swift prosperity of the American visitors that, so little in the original reckoning, she should yet appear conscious, charmingly, frankly conscious, of possibilities of friendship for them. Milly had easily and, as a guest, gracefully generalised: English girls had a special strong beauty which particularly showed in evening dress—above all when, as was strikingly the case with this one, the dress itself was what it should be. That observation she had all ready for Lord Mark when they should, after a little, get round to it. She seemed even now to see that there might be a good deal they would get round to; the indication being that, taken up once for all with her other neighbour, their hostess would leave them much to themselves. Mrs. Lowder's other neighbour was the Bishop of Murrum—a real bishop, such as Milly had never seen, with a complicated costume, a voice like an old-fashioned wind instrument, and a face all the portrait of a prelate; while the gentleman on our young lady's left, a gentleman thick-necked, large and literal, who looked straight before him and as if he were not to be diverted by vain words from that pursuit, clearly counted as an offset to the possession of Lord Mark. As Milly made out these things—with a shade of exhilaration at the way she already fell in—she saw how she was justified of her plea for people and her love of life. It wasn't then, as the prospect seemed to show, so difficult to get into the current, or to stand at any rate on the bank. It was easy to get near—if they *were* near; and yet the elements were different enough from any of her old elements, and positively rich and strange.

She asked herself if her right-hand neighbour would understand what she meant by such a description of them should she throw it off; but another of the things to which precisely her sense was awakened was that no, decidedly, he wouldn't. It was nevertheless by this time open to her that his line would be to be clever; and indeed, evidently, no little of the interest was going to be in the fresh reference and fresh effect both of people's cleverness and of their simplicity. She thrilled, she consciously flushed, and all to turn pale again,

with the certitude—it had never been so present—that she should find herself completely involved: the very air of the place, the pitch of the occasion, had for her both so sharp a ring and so deep an undertone. The smallest things, the faces, the hands, the jewels of the women, the sound of words, especially of names, across the table, the shape of the forks, the arrangement of the flowers, the attitude of the servants, the walls of the room, were all touches in a picture and denotements in a play; and they marked for her moreover her alertness of vision. She had never, she might well believe, been in such a state of vibration; her sensibility was almost too sharp for her comfort: there were for example more indications than she could reduce to order in the manner of the friendly niece, who struck her as distinguished and interesting, as in fact surprisingly genial. This young woman's type had, visibly, other possibilities; yet here, of its own free movement, it had already sketched a relation. Were they, Miss Croy and she, to take up the tale where their two elders had left it off so many years before?—were they to find they liked each other and to try for themselves whether a scheme of constancy on more modern lines could be worked? She had doubted, as they came to England, of Maud Manningham, had believed her a broken reed and a vague resource, had seen their dependence on her as a state of mind that would have been shamefully silly—so far as it *was* dependence—had they wished to do anything so inane as "get into society." To have made their pilgrimage all for the sake of such society as Mrs. Lowder might have in reserve for them—that didn't bear thinking of at all, and she herself had quite chosen her course for curiosity about other matters. She would have described this curiosity as a desire to see the places she had read about, and *that* description of her motive she was prepared to give her neighbour—even though, as a consequence of it, he should find how little she had read. It was almost at present as if her poor prevision had been rebuked by the majesty—she could scarcely call it less—of the event, or at all events by the commanding character of the two figures (she could scarcely call *that* less either) mainly presented. Mrs. Lowder and her niece, however dissimilar, had at least in common that each was a great reality. That was true, primarily, of the aunt—so true that Milly wondered how her own companion had arrived in other years at so odd an alliance; yet she none the less felt Mrs. Lowder as a person of whom the mind might in two or three days roughly make the circuit. She would sit there massive at least while one attempted it; whereas Miss Croy, the handsome girl, would indulge in incalculable movements that might interfere with one's tour. She was the amusing resisting ominous fact, none the less, and each other person and thing was just such a fact; and it served them right, no doubt, the pair of them, for having rushed into their adventure.

Lord Mark's intelligence meanwhile, however, had met her own quite sufficiently to enable him to tell her how little he could clear up her situation. He explained, for that matter—or at least he hinted—that there was no such thing to-day in London as saying where any one was. Every one was everywhere—nobody was anywhere. He should be put to it—yes, frankly—to give a name of any sort or kind to their hostess's "set." Was it a set at all, or wasn't it, and were there not really no such things as sets in the place any more?—was there anything but the groping and pawing, that of the vague billows of some great greasy sea in mid-Channel, of masses of bewildered people trying to "get" they didn't know what or where? He threw out the question, which seemed large; Milly felt that at the end of five minutes he had thrown out a great many, though he followed none more than a step or two; perhaps he would prove suggestive, but he helped her as yet to no discriminations: he spoke as if he had given them up from too much knowledge. He was thus at the opposite extreme from herself, but, as a consequence of it, also wandering and lost; and he was furthermore, for all his temporary incoherence, to which she guessed there would be some key, as packed a concretion as either Mrs. Lowder or Kate. The only light in which he placed the former of these ladies was that of an extraordinary woman—a most extraordinary woman, and "the more extraordinary the more one knows her," while of the latter he said nothing for the moment but that she was tremendously, yes, quite tremendously, good-looking. It was some time, she thought, before his talk showed his cleverness, and yet each minute she believed in that mystery more, quite apart from what her hostess had told her on first naming him. Perhaps he was one of the cases she had heard of at home—those characteristic cases of people in England who concealed their play of mind so much more than they advertised it. Even Mr. Densher a little did that. And what made Lord Mark, at any rate, so real either, when this was a trick he had apparently so mastered? His type somehow, as by a life, a need, an intention of its own, took all care for vividness off his hands; that was enough. It was difficult to guess his age—whether he were a young man who looked old or an old man who looked young; it seemed to prove nothing, as against other things, that he was bald and, as might have been said, slightly stale, or, more delicately perhaps, dry: there was such a fine little fidget of preoccupied life in him, and his eyes, at moments—though it was an appearance they could suddenly lose—were as candid and clear as those of a pleasant boy. Very neat, very light, and so fair that there was little other indication of his moustache than his constantly feeling it—which was again boyish—he would have affected her as the most intellectual person present if he had not affected her as the most frivolous. The latter quality was rather in his look than in anything else, though he constantly wore his double eye-glass, which was, much more, Bostonian and thoughtful.

The idea of his frivolity had, no doubt, to do with his personal designation, which represented—as yet, for our young woman, a little confusedly—a connexion with an historic patriciate, a class that in turn, also confusedly, represented an affinity with a social element she had never heard otherwise described than as

"fashion." The supreme social element in New York had never known itself but as reduced to that category, and though Milly was aware that, as applied to a territorial and political aristocracy, the label was probably too simple, she had for the time none other at hand. She presently, it is true, enriched her idea with the perception that her interlocutor was indifferent; yet this, indifferent as aristocracies notoriously were, saw her but little further, inasmuch as she felt that, in the first place, he would much rather get on with her than not, and in the second was only thinking of too many matters of his own. If he kept her in view on the one hand and kept so much else on the other—the way he crumbed up his bread was a proof—why did he hover before her as a potentially insolent noble? She couldn't have answered the question, and it was precisely one of those that swarmed. They were complicated, she might fairly have said, by his visibly knowing, having known from afar off, that she was a stranger and an American, and by his none the less making no more of it than if she and her like were the chief of his diet. He took her, kindly enough, but imperturbably, irreclaimably, for granted, and it wouldn't in the least help that she herself knew him, as quickly, for having been in her country and threshed it out. There would be nothing for her to explain or attenuate or brag about; she could neither escape nor prevail by her strangeness; he would have, for that matter, on such a subject, more to tell her than to learn from her. She might learn from *him* why she was so different from the handsome girl—which she didn't know, being merely able to feel it; or at any rate might learn from him why the handsome girl was so different from her.

On these lines, however, they would move later; the lines immediately laid down were, in spite of his vagueness for his own convenience, definite enough. She was already, he observed to her, thinking what she should say on her other side—which was what Americans were always doing. She needn't in conscience say anything at all; but Americans never knew that, nor ever, poor creatures, yes *(she* had interposed the "poor creatures!") what not to do. The burdens they took on—the things, positively, they made an affair of! This easy and after all friendly jibe at her race was really for her, on her new friend's part, the note of personal recognition so far as she required it; and she gave him a prompt and conscious example of morbid anxiety by insisting that her desire to be, herself, "lovely" all round was justly founded on the lovely way Mrs. Lowder had met her. He was directly interested in that, and it was not till afterwards she fully knew how much more information about their friend he had taken than given. Here again for instance was a characteristic note: she had, on the spot, with her first plunge into the obscure depths of a society constituted from far back, encountered the interesting phenomenon of complicated, of possibly sinister motive. However, Maud Manningham (her name, even in her presence, somehow still fed the fancy) *had,* all the same, been lovely, and one was going to meet her now quite as far on as one had one's self been met. She had been with them at their hotel—they were a pair—before even they had supposed she could have got their letter. Of course indeed they had written in advance, but they had followed that up very fast. She had thus engaged them to dine but two days later, and on the morrow again, without waiting for a return visit, without waiting for anything, she had called with her niece. It was as if she really cared for them, and it was magnificent fidelity —fidelity to Mrs. Stringham, her own companion and Mrs. Lowder's former school-mate, the lady with the charming face and the rather high dress down there at the end.

Lord Mark took in through his nippers these balanced attributes of Susie. "But isn't Mrs. Stringham's fidelity then equally magnificent?"

"Well, it's a beautiful sentiment; but it isn't as if she had anything to *give."*

"Hasn't she got you?" Lord Mark asked without excessive delay.

"Me—to give Mrs. Lowder?" Milly had clearly not yet seen herself in the light of such an offering. "Oh I'm rather a poor present; and I don't feel as if, even at that, I had as yet quite been given."

"You've been shown, and if our friend has jumped at you it comes to the same thing." He made his jokes, Lord Mark, without amusement for himself; yet it wasn't that he was grim. "To be seen, you must recognise, is, for you, to be jumped at; and, if it's a question of being shown, here you are again. Only it has now been taken out of your friend's hands; it's Mrs. Lowder already who's getting the benefit. Look round the table, and you'll make out, I think, that you're being, from top to bottom, jumped at."

"Well then," said Milly, "I seem also to feel that I like it better than being made fun of."

It was one of the things she afterwards saw—Milly was for ever seeing things afterwards—that her companion had here had some way of his own, quite unlike any one's else, of assuring her of his consideration. She wondered how he had done it, for he had neither apologised nor protested. She said to herself at any rate that he had led her on; and what was most odd was the question by which he had done so.

"Does she know much about you?"

"No, she just likes us."

Even for this his travelled lordship, seasoned and saturated, had no laugh. "I mean *you* particularly. Has

that lady with the charming face, which *is* charming, told her?"

Milly cast about. "Told her what?"

"Everything."

This, with the way he dropped it, again considerably moved her—made her feel for a moment that as a matter of course she was a subject for disclosures. But she quickly found her answer. "Oh as for that you must ask *her."*

"Your clever companion?"

"Mrs. Lowder."

He replied to this that their hostess was a person with whom there were certain liberties one never took, but that he was none the less fairly upheld, inasmuch as she was for the most part kind to him and as, should he be very good for a while, she would probably herself tell him. "And I shall have at any rate in the meantime the interest of seeing what she does with you. That will teach me more or less, you see, how much she knows."

Milly followed this—it was lucid, but it suggested something apart. "How much does she know about you?"

"Nothing," said Lord Mark serenely. "But that doesn't matter-for what she does with me." And then as to anticipate Milly's question about the nature of such doing: "This for instance—turning me straight on for you."

The girl thought. "And you mean she wouldn't if she did know—?"

He met it as if it were really a point. "No. I believe, to do her justice, she still would. So you can be easy."

Milly had the next instant then acted on the permission. "Because you're even at the worst the best thing she has?"

With this he was at last amused. "I was till you came. You're the best now."

It was strange his words should have given her the sense of his knowing, but it was positive that they did so, and to the extent of making her believe them, though still with wonder. That really from this first of their meetings was what was most to abide with her: she accepted almost helplessly—she surrendered so to the inevitable in it—being the sort of thing, as he might have said, that he at least thoroughly believed he had, in going about, seen enough of for all practical purposes. Her submission was naturally moreover not to be impaired by her learning later on that he had paid at short intervals, though at a time apparently just previous to her own emergence from the obscurity of extreme youth, three separate visits to New York, where his nameable friends and his contrasted contacts had been numerous. His impression, his recollection of the whole mixed quantity, was still visibly rich. It had helped him to place her, and she was more and more sharply conscious of having—as with the door sharply slammed upon her and the guard's hand raised in signal to the train—been popped into the compartment in which she was to travel for him. It was a use of her that many a girl would have been doubtless quick to resent; and the kind of mind that thus, in our young lady, made all for mere seeing and taking is precisely one of the charms of our subject. Milly had practically just learned from him, had made out, as it were, from her rumbling compartment, that he gave her the highest place among their friend's actual properties. She was a success, that was what it came to, he presently assured her, and this was what it was to be a success; it always happened before one could know it. One's ignorance was in fact often the greatest part of it. "You haven't had time yet," he said; "this is nothing. But you'll see. You'll see everything. You can, you know—everything you dream of."

He made her more and more wonder; she almost felt as if he were showing her visions while he spoke; and strangely enough, though it was visions that had drawn her on, she hadn't had them in connexion—that is in such preliminary and necessary connexion—with such a face as Lord Mark's, such eyes and such a voice, such a tone and such a manner. He had for an instant the effect of making her ask herself if she were after all going to be afraid; so distinct was it for fifty seconds that a fear passed over her. There they were again—yes, certainly: Susie's overture to Mrs. Lowder had been their joke, but they had pressed in that gaiety an electric bell that continued to sound. Positively while she sat there she had the loud rattle in her ears, and she wondered during these moments why the others didn't hear it. They didn't stare, they didn't smile, and the fear in her that I speak of was but her own desire to stop it. That dropped, however, as if the alarm itself had ceased; she seemed to have seen in a quick though tempered glare that there were two courses for her, one to leave London again the first thing in the morning, the other to do nothing at all. Well, she would do nothing at all; she was already doing it; more than that, she had already done it, and her chance was gone. She gave herself up—she had the strangest sense, on the spot, of so deciding; for she had turned a corner before she went on again with Lord Mark. Inexpressive but intensely significant, he met as no one else could have done the very question she had suddenly put to Mrs. Stringham on the Brünig. Should she have it, whatever she did

have, that question had been, for long? “Ah so possibly not,” her neighbour appeared to reply; “therefore, don’t you see? I’m the way.” It was vivid that he might be, in spite of his absence of flourish; the way being doubtless just in that absence. The handsome girl, whom she didn’t lose sight of and who, she felt, kept her also in view—Mrs. Lowder’s striking niece would perhaps be the way as well, for in her too was the absence of flourish, though she had little else, so far as one could tell, in common with Lord Mark. Yet how indeed *could* one tell, what did one understand, and of what was one, for that matter, provisionally conscious but of their being somehow together in what they represented? Kate Croy, fine but friendly, looked over at her as really with a guess at Lord Mark’s effect on her. If she could guess this effect what then did she know about it and in what degree had she felt it herself? Did that represent, as between them, anything particular, and should she have to count with them as duplicating, as intensifying by a mutual intelligence, the relation into which she was sinking? Nothing was so odd as that she should have to recognise so quickly in each of these glimpses of an instant the various signs of a relation; and this anomaly itself, had she had more time to give to it, might well, might almost terribly have suggested to her that her doom was to live fast. It was queerly a question of the short run and the consciousness proportionately crowded.

These were immense excursions for the spirit of a young person at Mrs. Lowder’s mere dinner-party; but what was so significant and so admonitory as the fact of their being possible? What could they have been just a part, already, of the crowded consciousness? And it was just a part likewise that while plates were changed and dishes presented and periods in the banquet marked; while appearances insisted and phenomena multiplied and words reached her from here and there like plashes of a slow thick tide; while Mrs. Lowder grew somehow more stout and more instituted and Susie, at her distance and in comparison, more thinly improvised and more different—different, that is, from every one and every thing: it was just a part that while this process went forward our young lady alighted, came back, taking up her destiny again as if she had been able by a wave or two of her wings to place herself briefly in sight of an alternative to it. Whatever it was it had showed in this brief interval as better than the alternative; and it now presented itself altogether in the image and in the place in which she had left it. The image was that of her being, as Lord Mark had declared, a success. This depended more or less of course on his idea of the thing—into which at present, however, she wouldn’t go. But, renewing soon, she had asked him what he meant then that Mrs. Lowder would do with her, and he had replied that this might safely be left. “She’ll get back,” he pleasantly said, “her money.” He could say it too—which was singular—without affecting her either as vulgar or as “nasty”; and he had soon explained himself by adding: “Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing.”

“Ah if you mean that we shall reward her as hard as ever we can, nothing is more certain. But she’s an idealist,” Milly continued, “and idealists, in the long run, I think, *don’t* feel that they lose.”

Lord Mark seemed, within the limits of his enthusiasm, to find this charming. “Ah she strikes you as an idealist?”

“She idealises us, my friend and me, absolutely. She sees us in a light,” said Milly. “That’s all I’ve got to hold on by. So don’t deprive me of it.”

“I wouldn’t think of such a thing for the world. But do you suppose,” he continued as if it were suddenly important for him—“do you suppose she sees *me* in a light?”

She neglected his question for a little, partly because her attention attached itself more and more to the handsome girl, partly because, placed so near their hostess, she wished not to show as discussing her too freely. Mrs. Lowder, it was true, steering in the other quarter a course in which she called at subjects as if they were islets in an archipelago, continued to allow them their ease, and Kate Croy at the same time steadily revealed herself as interesting. Milly in fact found of a sudden her ease—found it all as she bethought herself that what Mrs. Lowder was really arranging for was a report on her quality and, as perhaps might be said her value, from Lord Mark. She wished him, the wonderful lady, to have no pretext for not knowing what he thought of Miss Theale. Why his judgement so mattered remained to be seen; but it was this divination that in any case now determined Milly’s rejoinder. “No. She knows you. She has probably reason to. And you all here know each other—I see that—so far as you know anything. You know what you’re used to, and it’s your being used to it—that, and that only—that makes you. But there are things you don’t know.”

He took it in as if it might fairly, to do him justice, be a point. “Things that *I* don’t—with all the pains I take and the way I’ve run about the world to leave nothing unlearned?”

Milly thought, and it was perhaps the very truth of his claim—its not being negligible—that sharpened her impatience and thereby her wit. “You’re *blasé,* but you’re not enlightened. You’re familiar with everything, but conscious really of nothing. What I mean is that you’ve no imagination.”

Lord Mark at this threw back his head, ranging with his eyes the opposite side of the room and showing himself at last so much more flagrantly diverted that it fairly attracted their hostess’s notice. Mrs. Lowder, however, only smiled on Milly for a sign that something racy was what she had expected, and resumed, with a

splash of her screw, her cruise among the islands. “Oh I’ve heard that,” the young man replied, “before!”

“There it is then. You’ve heard everything before. You’ve heard *me* of course before, in my country, often enough.”

“Oh never too often,” he protested. “I’m sure I hope I shall still hear you again and again.”

“But what good then has it done you?” the girl went on as if now frankly to amuse him.

“Oh you’ll see when you know me.”

“But most assuredly I shall never know you.”

“Then that will be exactly,” he laughed, “the good!”

If it established thus that they couldn’t or wouldn’t mix, why did Milly none the less feel through it a perverse quickening of the relation to which she had been in spite of herself appointed? What queerer consequence of their not mixing than their talking—for it was what they had arrived at—almost intimately? She wished to get away from him, or indeed, much rather, away from herself so far as she was present to him. She saw already—wonderful creature, after all, herself too—that there would be a good deal more of him to come for her, and that the special sign of their intercourse would be to keep herself out of the question. Everything else might come in—only never that; and with such an arrangement they would perhaps even go far. This in fact might quite have begun, on the spot, with her returning again to the topic of the handsome girl. If she was to keep herself out she could naturally best do so by putting in somebody else. She accordingly put in Kate Croy, being ready to that extent—as she was not at all afraid for her—to sacrifice her if necessary. Lord Mark himself, for that matter, had made it easy by saying a little while before that no one among them did anything for nothing. “What then”—she was aware of being abrupt—“does Miss Croy, if she’s so interested, do it for? What has she to gain by *her* lovely welcome? Look at her now!” Milly broke out with characteristic freedom of praise, though pulling herself up also with a compunctious “Oh!” as the direction thus given to their eyes happened to coincide with a turn of Kate’s face to them. All she had meant to do was to insist that this face was fine; but what she had in fact done was to renew again her effect of showing herself to its possessor as conjoined with Lord Mark for some interested view of it. He had, however, promptly met her question.

“To gain? Why your acquaintance.”

“Well, what’s my acquaintance to *her?* She can care for me—she must feel that—only by being sorry for me; and that’s why she’s lovely: to be already willing to take the trouble to be. It’s the height of the disinterested.”

There were more things in this than one that Lord Mark might have taken up; but in a minute he had made his choice. “Ah then I’m nowhere, for I’m afraid *I’m* not sorry for you in the least. What do you make then,” he asked, “of your success?”

“Why just the great reason of all. It’s just because our friend there sees it that she pities me. She understands,” Milly said; “she’s better than any of you. She’s beautiful.”

He appeared struck with this at last—with the point the girl made of it; to which she came back even after a diversion created by a dish presented between them. “Beautiful in character, I see. Is she so? You must tell me about her.”

Milly wondered. “But haven’t you known her longer than I? Haven’t you seen her for yourself?”

“No—I’ve failed with her. It’s no use. I don’t make her out. And I assure you I really should like to.” His assurance had in fact for his companion a positive suggestion of sincerity; he affected her as now saying something he did feel; and she was the more struck with it as she was still conscious of the failure even of curiosity he had just shown in respect to herself. She had meant something— though indeed for herself almost only—in speaking of their friend’s natural pity; it had doubtless been a note of questionable taste, but it had quavered out in spite of her and he hadn’t so much as cared to enquire “Why ‘natural’?” Not that it wasn’t really much better for her that he shouldn’t: explanations would in truth have taken her much too far. Only she now perceived that, in comparison, her word about this other person really “drew” him; and there were things in that probably, many things, as to which she would learn more and which glimmered there already as part and parcel of that larger “real” with which, in her new situation, she was to be beguiled. It was in fact at the very moment, this element, not absent from what Lord Mark was further saying. “So you’re wrong, you see, as to our knowing all about each other. There are cases where we break down. I at any rate give her up—up, that is, to you. You must do her for me—tell me, I mean, when you know more. You’ll notice,” he pleasantly wound up, “that I’ve confidence in you.”

“Why shouldn’t you have?” Milly asked, observing in this, as she thought, a fine, though for such a man a

surprisingly artless, fatuity. It was as if there might have been a question of her falsifying for the sake of her own show—that is of the failure of her honesty to be proof against her desire to keep well with him herself. She didn't, none the less, otherwise protest against his remark; there was something else she was occupied in seeing. It was the handsome girl alone, one of his own species and his own society, who had made him feel uncertain; of his certainties about a mere little American, a cheap exotic, imported almost wholesale and whose habitat, with its conditions of climate, growth and cultivation, its immense profusion but its few varieties and thin development, he was perfectly satisfied. The marvel was too that Milly understood his satisfaction—feeling she expressed the truth in presently saying: "Of course; I make out that she must be difficult; just as I see that I myself must be easy." And that was what, for all the rest of this occasion, remained with her—as the most interesting thing that *could* remain. She was more and more content herself to be easy; she would have been resigned, even had it been brought straighter home to her, to passing for a cheap exotic. Provisionally, at any rate, that protected her wish to keep herself, with Lord Mark, in abeyance. They *had* all affected her as inevitably knowing each other, and if the handsome girl's place among them was something even their initiation couldn't deal with—why then she would indeed be a quantity.

—II—

That sense of quantities, separate or mixed, was really, no doubt, what most prevailed at first for our slightly gasping American pair; it found utterance for them in their frequent remark to each other that they had no one but themselves to thank. It dropped from Milly more than once that if she had ever known it was so easy —! though her exclamation mostly ended without completing her idea. This, however, was a trifle to Mrs. Stringham, who cared little whether she meant that in this case she would have come sooner. She couldn't have come sooner, and she perhaps on the contrary meant—for it would have been like her—that she wouldn't have come at all; why it was so easy being at any rate a matter as to which her companion had begun quickly to pick up views. Susie kept some of these lights for the present to herself, since, freely communicated, they might have been a little disturbing; with which, moreover, the quantities that we speak of as surrounding the two ladies were in many cases quantities of things—and of other things—to talk about. Their immediate lesson accordingly was that they just had been caught up by the incalculable strength of a wave that was actually holding them aloft and that would naturally dash them wherever it liked. They meanwhile, we hasten to add, made the best of their precarious position, and if Milly had had no other help for it she would have found not a little in the sight of Susan Shepherd's state. The girl had had nothing to say to her, for three days, about the "success" announced by Lord Mark—which they saw, besides, otherwise established; she was too taken up, too touched, by Susie's own exaltation. Susie glowed in the light of her justified faith; everything had happened that she had been acute enough to think least probable; she had appealed to a possible delicacy in Maud Manningham—a delicacy, mind you, but *barely* possible—and her appeal had been met in a way that was an honour to human nature. This proved sensibility of the lady of Lancaster Gate performed verily for both our friends during these first days the office of a fine floating gold-dust, something that threw over the prospect a harmonising blur. The forms, the colours behind it were strong and deep—we have seen how they already stood out for Milly; but nothing, comparatively, had had so much of the dignity of truth as the fact of Maud's fidelity to a sentiment. That was what Susie was proud of, much more than of her great place in the world, which she was moreover conscious of not as yet wholly measuring. That was what was more vivid even than her being—in senses more worldly and in fact almost in the degree of a revelation—English and distinct and positive, with almost no inward but with the finest outward resonance.

Susan Shepherd's word for her, again and again, was that she was "large"; yet it was not exactly a case, as to the soul, of echoing chambers: she might have been likened rather to a capacious receptacle, originally perhaps loose, but now drawn as tightly as possible over its accumulated contents—a packed mass, for her American admirer, of curious detail. When the latter good lady, at home, had handsomely figured her friends as not small—which was the way she mostly figured them—there was a certain implication that they were spacious because they were empty. Mrs. Lowder, by a different law, was spacious because she was full, because she had something in common, even in repose, with a projectile, of great size, loaded and ready for use. That indeed, to Susie's romantic mind, announced itself as half the charm of their renewal—a charm as of sitting in springtime, during a long peace, on the daisied grassy bank of some great slumbering fortress. True to her psychological instincts, certainly, Mrs. Stringham had noted that the "sentiment" she rejoiced in on her old school-mate's part was all a matter of action and movement, was not, save for the interweaving of a more frequent plump "dearest" than she would herself perhaps have used, a matter of much other embroidery. She brooded with interest on this further mark of race, feeling in her own spirit a different economy. The joy, for her, was to know *why* she acted—the reason was half the business; whereas with Mrs. Lowder there might have been no reason: "why" was the trivial seasoning-substance, the vanilla or the nutmeg, omittable from the

nutritive pudding without spoiling it. Mrs. Lowder's desire was clearly sharp that their young companions should also prosper together; and Mrs. Stringham's account of it all to Milly, during the first days, was that when, at Lancaster Gate, she was not occupied in telling, as it were, about her, she was occupied in hearing much of the history of her hostess's brilliant niece.

They had plenty, on these lines, the two elder women, to give and to take, and it was even not quite clear to the pilgrim from Boston that what she should mainly have arranged for in London was not a series of thrills for herself. She had a bad conscience, indeed almost a sense of immorality, in having to recognise that she was, as she said, carried away. She laughed to Milly when she also said that she didn't know where it would end; and the principle of her uneasiness was that Mrs. Lowder's life bristled for her with elements that she was really having to look at for the first time. They represented, she believed, the world, the world that, as a consequence of the cold shoulder turned to it by the Pilgrim Fathers, had never yet boldly crossed to Boston—it would surely have sunk the stoutest Cunarder—and she couldn't pretend that she faced the prospect simply because Milly had had a caprice. She was in the act herself of having one, directed precisely to their present spectacle. She could but seek strength in the thought that she had never had one—or had never yielded to one, which came to the same thing—before. The sustaining sense of it all moreover as literary material—that quite dropped from her. She must wait, at any rate, she should see: it struck her, so far as she had got, as vast, obscure, lurid. She reflected in the watches of the night that she was probably just going to love it for itself—that is for itself and Milly. The odd thing was that she could think of Milly's loving it without dread—or with dread at least not on the score of conscience, only on the score of peace. It was a mercy at all events, for the hour, that their two spirits jumped together.

While, for this first week that followed their dinner, she drank deep at Lancaster Gate, her companion was no less happily, appeared to be indeed on the whole quite as romantically, provided for. The handsome English girl from the heavy English house had been as a figure in a picture stepping by magic out of its frame: it was a case in truth for which Mrs. Stringham presently found the perfect image. She had lost none of her grasp, but quite the contrary, of that other conceit in virtue of which Milly was the wandering princess: so what could be more in harmony now than to see the princess waited upon at the city gate by the worthiest maiden, the chosen daughter of the burgesses? It was the real again, evidently, the amusement of the meeting for the princess too; princesses living for the most part, in such an appeased way, on the plane of mere elegant representation. That was why they pounced, at city gates, on deputed flower-strewing damsels; that was why, after effigies, processions and other stately games, frank human company was pleasant to them. Kate Croy really presented herself to Milly—the latter abounded for Mrs. Stringham in accounts of it—as the wondrous London girl in person (by what she had conceived, from far back, of the London girl; conceived from the tales of travellers and the anecdotes of New York, from old porings over *Punch* and a liberal acquaintance with the fiction of the day). The only thing was that she was nicer, since the creature in question had rather been, to our young woman, an image of dread. She had thought of her, at her best, as handsome just as Kate was, with turns of head and tones of voice, felicities of stature and attitude, things "put on" and, for that matter, put off, all the marks of the product of a packed society who should be at the same time the heroine of a strong story. She placed this striking young person from the first in a story, saw her, by a necessity of the imagination, for a heroine, felt it the only character in which she wouldn't be wasted; and this in spite of the heroine's pleasant abruptness, her forbearance from gush, her umbrellas and jackets and shoes—as these things sketched themselves to Milly—and something rather of a breezy boy in the carriage of her arms and the occasional freedom of her slang.

When Milly had settled that the extent of her good will itself made her shy, she had found for the moment quite a sufficient key, and they were by that time thoroughly afloat together. This might well have been the happiest hour they were to know, attacking in friendly independence their great London—the London of shops and streets and suburbs oddly interesting to Milly, as well as of museums, monuments, "sights" oddly unfamiliar to Kate, while their elders pursued a separate course; these two rejoicing not less in their intimacy and each thinking the other's young woman a great acquisition for her own. Milly expressed to Susan Shepherd more than once that Kate had some secret, some smothered trouble, besides all the rest of her history; and that if she had so good-naturedly helped Mrs. Lowder to meet them this was exactly to create a diversion, to give herself something else to think about. But on the case thus postulated our young American had as yet had no light: she only felt that when the light should come it would greatly deepen the colour; and she liked to think she was prepared for anything. What she already knew moreover was full, to her vision, of English, of eccentric, of Thackerayan character [10]—Kate Croy having gradually become not a little explicit on the subject of her situation, her past, her present, her general predicament, her small success, up to the present hour, in contenting at the same time her father, her sister, her aunt and herself. It was Milly's subtle guess, imparted to her Susie, that the girl had somebody else as well, as yet unnamed, to content—it being manifest that such a creature couldn't help having; a creature not perhaps, if one would, exactly formed to inspire passions, since that always implied a certain silliness, but essentially seen, by the admiring eye of friendship, under the clear shadow of some probably eminent male interest. The clear shadow, from whatever source projected, hung at any rate over Milly's companion the whole week, and Kate Croy's handsome face

smiled out of it, under bland skylights, in the presence alike of old masters passive in their glory and of thoroughly new ones, the newest, who bristled restlessly with pins and brandished snipping shears.

It was meanwhile a pretty part of the intercourse of these young ladies that each thought the other more remarkable than herself—that each thought herself, or assured the other she did, a comparatively dusty object and the other a favourite of nature and of fortune and covered thereby with the freshness of the morning. Kate was amused, amazed, at the way her friend insisted on "taking" her, and Milly wondered if Kate were sincere in finding her the most extraordinary—quite apart from her being the most charming—person she had come across. They had talked, in long drives, and quantities of history had not been wanting—in the light of which Mrs. Lowder's niece might superficially seem to have had the best of the argument. Her visitor's American references, with their bewildering immensities, their confounding moneyed New York, their excitements of high pressure, their opportunities of wild freedom, their record of used-up relatives, parents, clever eager fair slim brothers—these the most loved—all engaged, as well as successive superseded guardians, in a high extravagance of speculation and dissipation that had left this exquisite being her black dress, her white face and her vivid hair as the mere last broken link: such a picture quite threw into the shade the brief biography, however sketchily amplified, of a mere middle-class nobody in Bayswater. And though that indeed might be but a Bayswater way of putting it, in addition to which Milly was in the stage of interest in Bayswater ways, this critic so far prevailed that, like Mrs. Stringham herself, she fairly got her companion to accept from her that she was quite the nearest approach to a practical princess Bayswater could hope ever to know. It was a fact—it became one at the end of three days—that Milly actually began to borrow from the handsome girl a sort of view of her state; the handsome girl's impression of it was clearly so sincere. This impression was a tribute, a tribute positively to power, power the source of which was the last thing Kate treated as a mystery. There were passages, under all their skylights, the succession of their shops being large, in which the latter's easy yet the least bit dry manner sufficiently gave out that if *she* had had so deep a pocket—!

It was not moreover by any means with not having the imagination of expenditure that she appeared to charge her friend, but with not having the imagination of terror, of thrift, the imagination or in any degree the habit of a conscious dependence on others. Such moments, when all Wigmore Street, for instance, seemed to rustle about and the pale girl herself to be facing the different rustlers, usually so undiscriminated, as individual Britons too, Britons personal, parties to a relation and perhaps even intrinsically remarkable—such moments in especial determined for Kate a perception of the high happiness of her companion's liberty. Milly's range was thus immense; she had to ask nobody for anything, to refer nothing to any one; her freedom, her fortune and her fancy were her law; an obsequious world surrounded her, she could sniff up at every step its fumes. And Kate, these days, was altogether in the phase of forgiving her so much bliss; in the phase moreover of believing that, should they continue to go on together, she would abide in that generosity. She had at such a point as this no suspicion of a rift within the lute—by which we mean not only none of anything's coming between them, but none of any definite flaw in so much clearness of quality. Yet, all the same, if Milly, at Mrs. Lowder's banquet, had described herself to Lord Mark as kindly used by the young woman on the other side because of some faintly-felt special propriety in it, so there really did match with this, privately, on the young woman's part, a feeling not analysed but divided, a latent impression that Mildred Theale was not, after all, a person to change places, to change even chances with. Kate, verily, would perhaps not quite have known what she meant by this discrimination, and she came near naming it only when she said to herself that, rich as Milly was, one probably wouldn't—which was singular—ever hate her for it. The handsome girl had, with herself, these felicities and crudities: it wasn't obscure to her that, without some very particular reason to help, it might have proved a test of one's philosophy not to be irritated by a mistress of millions, or whatever they were, who, as a girl, so easily might have been, like herself, only vague and cruelly female. She was by no means sure of liking Aunt Maud as much as *she* deserved, and Aunt Maud's command of funds was obviously inferior to Milly's. There was thus clearly, as pleading for the latter, some influence that would later on become distinct; and meanwhile, decidedly, it was enough that she was as charming as she was queer and as queer as she was charming—all of which was a rare amusement; as well, for that matter, as further sufficient that there were objects of value she had already pressed on Kate's acceptance. A week of her society in these conditions—conditions that Milly chose to sum up as ministering immensely, for a blind vague pilgrim, to aid and comfort—announced itself from an early hour as likely to become a week of presents, acknowledgements, mementoes, pledges of gratitude and admiration, that were all on one side. Kate as promptly embraced the propriety of making it clear that she must forswear shops till she should receive some guarantee that the contents of each one she entered as a humble companion shouldn't be placed at her feet; yet that was in truth not before she had found herself in possession, under whatever protests, of several precious ornaments and other minor conveniences.

Great was the absurdity too that there should have come a day, by the end of the week, when it appeared that all Milly would have asked in definite "return," as might be said, was to be told a little about Lord Mark and to be promised the privilege of a visit to Mrs. Condrip. Far other amusements had been offered her, but her eagerness was shamelessly human, and she seemed really to count more on the revelation of the anxious lady at Chelsea than on the best nights of the opera. Kate admired, and showed it, such an absence of fear: to

the fear of being bored in such a connexion she would have been so obviously entitled. Milly's answer to this was the plea of her curiosities—which left her friend wondering as to their odd direction. Some among them, no doubt, were rather more intelligible, and Kate had heard without wonder that she was blank about Lord Mark. This young lady's account of him, at the same time, professed itself frankly imperfect; for what they best knew him by at Lancaster Gate was a thing difficult to explain. One knew people in general by something they had to show, something that, either for them or against, could be touched or named or proved; and she could think of no other case of a value taken as so great and yet flourishing untested. His value was his future, which had somehow got itself as accepted by Aunt Maud as if it had been his good cook or his steam-launch. She, Kate, didn't mean she thought him a humbug; he might do great things—but they were as yet, so to speak, all he had done. On the other hand it was of course something of an achievement, and not open to every one, to have got one's self taken so seriously by Aunt Maud. The best thing about him doubtless, on the whole, was that Aunt Maud believed in him. She was often fantastic, but she knew a humbug, and—no, Lord Mark wasn't that. He had been a short time in the House, on the Tory side, but had lost his seat on the first opportunity, and this was all he had to point to. However, he pointed to nothing; which was very possibly just a sign of his real cleverness, one of those that the really clever had in common with the really void. Even Aunt Maud frequently admitted that there was a good deal, for her view of him, to bring up the rear. And he wasn't meanwhile himself indifferent—indifferent to himself—for he was working Lancaster Gate for all it was worth: just as it was, no doubt, working *him,* and just as the working and the worked were in London, as one might explain, the parties to every relation.

Kate did explain, for her listening friend; every one who had anything to give—it was true they were the fewest—made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return. The strangest thing furthermore was that this might be in cases a happy understanding. The worker in one connexion was the worked in another; it was as broad as it was long—with the wheels of the system, as might be seen, wonderfully oiled. People could quite like each other in the midst of it, as Aunt Maud, by every appearance, quite liked Lord Mark, and as Lord Mark, it was to be hoped, liked Mrs. Lowder, since if he didn't he was a greater brute than one could believe. She, Kate, hadn't yet, it was true, made out what he was doing for her—besides which the dear woman needed him, even at the most he could do, much less than she imagined; so far as all of which went, moreover, there were plenty of things on every side she hadn't yet made out. She believed, on the whole, in any one Aunt Maud took up; and she gave it to Milly as worth thinking of that, whatever wonderful people this young lady might meet in the land, she would meet no more extraordinary woman. There were greater celebrities by the million, and of course greater swells, but a bigger *person,* by Kate's view, and a larger natural handful every way, would really be far to seek. When Milly enquired with interest if Kate's belief in her was primarily on the lines of what Mrs. Lowder "took up," her interlocutress could handsomely say yes, since by the same principle she believed in herself. Whom but Aunt Maud's niece, pre-eminently, had Aunt Maud taken up, and who was thus more in the current, with her, of working and of being worked? "You may ask," Kate said, "what in the world I have to give; and that indeed is just what I'm trying to learn. There must be something, for her to think she can get it out of me. She will get it—trust her; and then I shall see what it is; which I beg you to believe I should never have found out for myself." She declined to treat any question of Milly's own "paying" power as discussable; that Milly would pay a hundred per cent—and even to the end, doubtless, through the nose—was just the beautiful basis on which they found themselves.

These were fine facilities, pleasantries, ironies, all these luxuries of gossip and philosophies of London and of life, and they became quickly, between the pair, the common form of talk, Milly professing herself delighted to know that something was to be done with her. If the most remarkable woman in England was to do it, so much the better, and if the most remarkable woman in England had them both in hand together why what could be jollier for each? When she reflected indeed a little on the oddity of her wanting two at once Kate had the natural reply that it was exactly what showed her sincerity. She invariably gave way to feeling, and feeling had distinctly popped up in her on the advent of her girlhood's friend. The way the cat would jump was always, in presence of anything that moved her, interesting to see; visibly enough, moreover, it hadn't for a long time jumped anything like so far. This in fact, as we already know, remained the marvel for Milly Theale, who, on sight of Mrs. Lowder, had found fifty links in respect to Susie absent from the chain of association. She knew so herself what she thought of Susie, that she would have expected the lady of Lancaster Gate to think something quite different; the failure of which endlessly mystified her. But her mystification was the cause for her of another fine impression, inasmuch as when she went so far as to observe to Kate that Susan Shepherd—and especially Susan Shepherd emerging so uninvited from an irrelevant past—ought by all the proprieties simply to have bored Aunt Maud, her confidant agreed to this without a protest and abounded in the sense of her wonder. Susan Shepherd at least bored the niece—that was plain; this young woman saw nothing in her—nothing to account for anything, not even for Milly's own indulgence: which little fact became in turn to the latter's mind a fact of significance. It was a light on the handsome girl—representing more than merely showed—that poor Susie was simply as nought to her. This was in a manner too a general admonition to poor Susie's companion, who seemed to see marked by it the

direction in which she had best most look out. It just faintly rankled in her that a person who was good enough and to spare for Milly Theale shouldn't be good enough for another girl; though, oddly enough, she could easily have forgiven Mrs. Lowder herself the impatience. Mrs. Lowder didn't feel it, and Kate Croy felt it with ease; yet in the end, be it added, she grasped the reason, and the reason enriched her mind. Wasn't it sufficiently the reason that the handsome girl was, with twenty other splendid qualities, the least bit brutal too, and didn't she suggest, as no one yet had ever done for her new friend, that there might be a wild beauty in that, and even a strange grace? Kate wasn't brutally brutal—which Milly had hitherto benightedly supposed the only way; she wasn't even aggressively so, but rather indifferently, defensively and, as might be said, by the habit of anticipation. She simplified in advance, was beforehand with her doubts, and knew with singular quickness what she wasn't, as they said in New York, going to like. In that way at least people were clearly quicker in England than at home; and Milly could quite see after a little how such instincts might become usual in a world in which dangers abounded. There were clearly more dangers roundabout Lancaster Gate than one suspected in New York or could dream of in Boston. At all events, with more sense of them, there were more precautions, and it was a remarkable world altogether in which there could be precautions, on whatever ground, against Susie.

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She certainly made up with Susie directly, however, for any allowance she might have had privately to extend to tepid appreciation; since the late and long talks of these two embraced not only everything offered and suggested by the hours they spent apart, but a good deal more besides. She might be as detached as the occasion required at four o'clock in the afternoon, but she used no such freedom to any one about anything as she habitually used about everything to Susan Shepherd at midnight. All the same, it should with much less delay than this have been mentioned, she hadn't yet—hadn't, that is, at the end of six days—produced any news for her comrade to compare with an announcement made her by the latter as a result of a drive with Mrs. Lowder, for a change, in the remarkable Battersea Park. The elder friends had sociably revolved there while the younger ones followed bolder fancies in the admirable equipage appointed to Milly at the hotel—a heavier, more emblazoned, more amusing chariot than she had ever, with "stables" notoriously mismanaged, known at home; whereby, in the course of the circuit, more than once repeated, it had "come out," as Mrs. Stringham said, that the couple at Lancaster Gate were, of all people, acquainted with Mildred's other English friend, the gentleman, the one connected with the English newspaper (Susie hung fire a little over his name) who had been with her in New York so shortly previous to present adventures. He had been named of course in Battersea Park—else he couldn't have been identified; and Susie had naturally, before she could produce her own share in the matter as a kind of confession, to make it plain that her allusion was to Mr. Merton Densher. This was because Milly had at first a little air of not knowing whom she meant; and the girl really kept, as well, a certain control of herself while she remarked that the case was surprising, the chance one in a thousand. They knew him, both Maud and Miss Croy knew him, she gathered too, rather well, though indeed it wasn't on any show of intimacy that he had happened to be mentioned. It hadn't been—Susie made the point—she herself who brought him in; he had in fact not been brought in at all, but only referred to as a young journalist known to Mrs. Lowder and who had lately gone to their wonderful country—Mrs. Lowder always said "your wonderful country"—on behalf of his journal. But Mrs. Stringham had taken it up—with the tips of her fingers indeed; and that was the confession: she had, without meaning any harm, recognised Mr. Densher as an acquaintance of Milly's, though she had also pulled herself up before getting in too far. Mrs. Lowder had been struck, clearly—it wasn't too much to say; then she also, it had rather seemed, had pulled herself up; and there had been a little moment during which each might have been keeping something from the other. "Only," said Milly's informant, "I luckily remembered in time that I had nothing whatever to keep—which was much simpler and nicer. I don't know what Maud has, but there it is. She was interested, distinctly, in your knowing him—in his having met you over there with so little loss of time. But I ventured to tell her it hadn't been so long as to make you as yet great friends. I don't know if I was right."

Whatever time this explanation might have taken, there had been moments enough in the matter now—before the elder woman's conscience had done itself justice—to enable Milly to reply that although the fact in question doubtless had its importance she imagined they wouldn't find the importance overwhelming. It was odd that their one Englishman should so instantly fit; it wasn't, however, miraculous—they surely all had often seen how extraordinarily "small," as every one said, was the world. Undoubtedly also Susie had done just the plain thing in not letting his name pass. Why in the world should there be a mystery? —and what an immense one they would appear to have made if he should come back and find they had concealed their knowledge of him! "I don't know, Susie dear," the girl observed, "what you think I have to conceal."

"It doesn't matter, at a given moment," Mrs. Stringham returned, "what you know or don't know as to

what I think; for you always find out the very next minute, and when you do find out, dearest, you never *really* care. Only," she presently asked, "have you heard of him from Miss Croy?"

"Heard of Mr. Densher? Never a word. We haven't mentioned him. Why should we?"

"That you haven't I understand; but that your friend hasn't," Susie opined, "may mean something."

"May mean what?"

"Well," Mrs. Stringham presently brought out, "I tell you all when I tell you that Maud asks me to suggest to you that it may perhaps be better for the present not to speak of him: not to speak of him to her niece, that is, unless she herself speaks to you first. But Maud thinks she won't."

Milly was ready to engage for anything; but in respect to the facts—as they so far possessed them—it all sounded a little complicated. "Is it because there's anything between them?"

"No—I gather not; but Maud's state of mind is precautionary. She's afraid of something. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say she's afraid of everything."

"She's afraid, you mean," Milly asked, "of their—a—liking each other?"

Susie had an intense thought and then an effusion. "My dear child, we move in a labyrinth."

"Of course we do. That's just the fun of it!" said Milly with a strange gaiety. Then she added: "Don't tell me that—in this for instance—there are not abysses. I want abysses."

Her friend looked at her—it was not unfrequently the case—a little harder than the surface of the occasion seemed to require; and another person present at such times might have wondered to what inner thought of her own the good lady was trying to fit the speech. It was too much her disposition, no doubt, to treat her young companion's words as symptoms of an imputed malady. It was none the less, however, her highest law to be light when the girl was light. She knew how to be quaint with the new quaintness—the great Boston gift; it had been happily her note in the magazines; and Maud Lowder, to whom it was new indeed and who had never heard anything remotely like it, quite cherished her, as a social resource, by reason of it. It shouldn't therefore fail her now; with it in fact one might face most things. "Ah then let us hope we shall sound the depths—I'm prepared for the worst—of sorrow and sin! But she would like her niece—we're not ignorant of that, are we?—to marry Lord Mark. Hasn't she told you so?"

"Hasn't Mrs. Lowder told me?"

"No; hasn't Kate? It isn't, you know, that she doesn't know it."

Milly had, under her comrade's eyes, a minute of mute detachment. She had lived with Kate Croy for several days in a state of intimacy as deep as it had been sudden, and they had clearly, in talk, in many directions, proceeded to various extremities. Yet it now came over her as in a clear cold wave that there was a possible account of their relations in which the quantity her new friend had told her might have figured as small, as smallest, beside the quantity she hadn't. She couldn't say at any rate whether or no Kate had made the point that her aunt designed her for Lord Mark: it had only sufficiently come out—which had been, moreover, eminently guessable—that she was involved in her aunt's designs. Somehow, for Milly, brush it over nervously as she might and with whatever simplifying hand, this abrupt extrusion of Mr. Densher altered all proportions, had an effect on all values. It was fantastic of her to let it make a difference that she couldn't in the least have defined—and she was at least, even during these instants, rather proud of being able to hide, on the spot, the difference it did make. Yet all the same the effect for her was, almost violently, of that gentleman's having been there—having been where she had stood till now in her simplicity—before her. It would have taken but another free moment to make her see abysses—since abysses were what she wanted—in the mere circumstance of his own silence, in New York, about his English friends. There had really been in New York little time for anything; but, had she liked, Milly could have made it out for herself that he had avoided the subject of Miss Croy and that Miss Croy was yet a subject it could never be natural to avoid, it was to be added at the same time that even if his silence had been a labyrinth—which was absurd in view of all the other things too he couldn't possibly have spoken of—this was exactly what must suit her, since it fell under the head of the plea she had just uttered to Susie. These things, however, came and went, and it set itself up between the companions, for the occasion, in the oddest way, both that their happening all to know Mr. Densher—except indeed that Susie didn't, but probably would—was a fact attached, in a world of rushing about, to one of the common orders of chance; and yet further that it was amusing—oh awfully amusing!—to be able fondly to hope that there was "something *in*" its having been left to crop up with such suddenness. There seemed somehow a possibility that the ground or, as it were, the air might in a manner have undergone some pleasing preparation; though the question of this possibility would probably, after all, have taken some threshing out. The truth, moreover—and there they were, already, our pair, talking about it, the "truth"!—hadn't in fact quite cropped out. This, obviously, in view of Mrs. Lowder's request to her old friend.

It was accordingly on Mrs. Lowder's recommendation that nothing should be said to Kate—it was on all this might cover in Aunt Maud that the idea of an interesting complication could best hope to perch; and when in fact, after the colloquy we have reported, Milly saw Kate again without mentioning any name, her silence succeeded in passing muster with her as the beginning of a new sort of fun. The sort was all the newer by its containing measurably a small element of anxiety: when she had gone in for fun before it had been with her hands a little more free. Yet it was, none the less, rather exciting to be conscious of a still sharper reason for interest in the handsome girl, as Kate continued even now pre-eminently to remain for her; and a reason—this was the great point—of which the young woman herself could have no suspicion. Twice over thus, for two or three hours together, Milly found herself seeing Kate, quite fixing her, in the light of the knowledge that it was a face on which Mr. Densher's eyes had more or less familiarly rested and which, by the same token, had looked, rather more beautifully than less, into his own. She pulled herself up indeed with the thought that it had inevitably looked, as beautifully as one would, into thousands of faces in which one might one's self never trace it; but just the odd result of the thought was to intensify for the girl that side of her friend which she had doubtless already been more prepared than she quite knew to think of as the "other," the not wholly calculable. It was fantastic, and Milly was aware of this; but the other side was what had, of a sudden, been turned straight toward her by the show of Mr. Densher's propinquity. She hadn't the excuse of knowing it for Kate's own, since nothing whatever as yet proved it particularly to be such. Never mind; it was with this other side now fully presented that Kate came and went, kissed her for greeting and for parting, talked, as usual, of everything but—as it had so abruptly become for Milly—*the* thing. Our young woman, it is true, would doubtless not have tasted so sharply a difference in this pair of occasions hadn't she been tasting so peculiarly her own possible betrayals. What happened was that afterwards, on separation, she wondered if the matter hadn't mainly been that she herself was so "other," so taken up with the unspoken; the strangest thing of all being, still subsequently, that when she asked herself how Kate could have failed to feel it she became conscious of being here on the edge of a great darkness. She should never know how Kate truly felt about anything such a one as Milly Theale should give her to feel. Kate would never—and not from ill will nor from duplicity, but from a sort of failure of common terms—reduce it to such a one's comprehension or put it within her convenience.

It was as such a one, therefore, that, for three or four days more, Milly watched Kate as just such another; and it was presently as such a one that she threw herself into their promised visit, at last achieved, to Chelsea, the quarter of the famous Carlyle,[v] the field of exercise of his ghost, his votaries, and the residence of "poor Marian," so often referred to and actually a somewhat incongruous spirit there. With our young woman's first view of poor Marian everything gave way but the sense of how in England, apparently, the social situation of sisters could be opposed, how common ground for a place in the world could quite fail them: a state of things sagely perceived to be involved in an hierarchical, an aristocratic order. Just whereabouts in the order Mrs. Lowder had established her niece was a question not wholly void as yet, no doubt, of ambiguity—though Milly was withal sure Lord Mark could exactly have fixed the point if he would, fixing it at the same time for Aunt Maud herself; but it was clear Mrs. Condrip was, as might have been said, in quite another geography.[11] She wouldn't have been to be found on the same social map, and it was as if her visitors had turned over page after page together before the final relief of their benevolent "Here!" The interval was bridged of course, but the bridge verily was needed, and the impression left Milly to wonder if, in the general connexion, it were of bridges or of intervals that the spirit not locally disciplined would find itself most conscious. It was as if at home, by contrast, there were neither—neither the difference itself, from position to position, nor, on either side, and particularly on one, the awfully good manner, the conscious sinking of a consciousness, that made up for it. The conscious sinking, at all events, and the awfully good manner, the difference, the bridge, the interval, the skipped leaves of the social atlas—these, it was to be confessed, had a little, for our young lady, in default of stouter stuff, to work themselves into the light literary legend—a mixed wandering echo of Trollope, of Thackeray, perhaps mostly of Dickens—under favour of which her pilgrimage had so much appealed. She could relate to Susie later on, late the same evening, that the legend, before she had done with it, had run clear, that the adored author of "The Newcomes , "[w] in fine, , had been on the whole the note: the picture lacking thus more than she had hoped, or rather perhaps showing less than she had feared, a certain possibility of Pickwickian outline. She explained how she meant by this that Mrs. Condrip hadn't altogether proved another Mrs. Nickleby, nor even—for she might have proved almost anything, from the way poor worried Kate had spoken—a widowed and aggravated Mrs. Micawber.

Mrs. Stringham, in the midnight conference, intimated rather yearningly, that, however the event might have turned, the side of English life such experiences opened to Milly were just those she herself seemed "booked"—as they were all, roundabout her now, always saying—to miss: she had begun to have a little, for her fellow observer, these moments of fanciful reaction (reaction in which she was once more all Susan Shepherd) against the high sphere of colder conventions into which her overwhelming connexion with Maud Manningham had rapt her. Milly never lost sight for long of the Susan Shepherd side of her, and was always there to meet it when it came up and vaguely, tenderly, impatiently to pat it, abounding in the assurance that they would still provide for it. They had, however, to-night another matter in hand; which proved to be

presently, on the girl's part, in respect to her hour of Chelsea, the revelation that Mrs. Condrip, taking a few minutes when Kate was away with one of the children, in bed upstairs for some small complaint, had suddenly (without its being in the least "led up to") broken ground on the subject of Mr. Densher, mentioned him with impatience as a person in love with her sister. "She wished me, if I cared for Kate, to know," Milly said—"for it would be quite too dreadful, and one might do something."

Susie wondered. "Prevent anything coming of it? That's easily said. Do what?"

Milly had a dim smile. "I think that what she would like is that I should come a good deal to see *her* about it."

"And doesn't she suppose you've anything else to do?"

The girl had by this time clearly made it out. "Nothing but to admire and make much of her sister—whom she doesn't, however, herself in the least understand—and give up one's time, and everything else, to it." It struck the elder friend that she spoke with an almost unprecedented approach to sharpness; as if Mrs. Condrip had been rather indescribably disconcerting. Never yet so much as just of late had Mrs. Stringham seen her companion exalted, and by the very play of something within, into a vague golden air that left irritation below. That was the great thing with Milly—it was her characteristic poetry, or at least it was Susan Shepherd's. "But she made a point," the former continued, "of my keeping what she says from Kate. I'm not to mention that she has spoken."

"And why," Mrs. Stringham presently asked, "is Mr. Densher so dreadful?"

Milly had, she thought, a delay to answer—something that suggested a fuller talk with Mrs. Condrip than she inclined perhaps to report. "It isn't so much he himself." Then the girl spoke a little as for the romance of it; one could never tell, with her, where romance would come in. "It's the state of his fortunes."

"And is that very bad?"

"He has no 'private means,' and no prospect of any. He has no income, and no ability, according to Mrs. Condrip, to make one. He's as poor, she calls it, as 'poverty,' and she says she knows what that is."

Again Mrs. Stringham considered, and it presently produced something. "But isn't he brilliantly clever?"

Milly had also then an instant that was not quite fruitless. "I haven't the least idea."

To which, for the time, Susie only replied "Oh!"—though by the end of a minute she had followed it with a slightly musing "I see"; and that in turn with: "It's quite what Maud Lowder thinks."

"That he'll never do anything?"

"No—quite the contrary: that he's exceptionally able."

"Oh yes; I know"—Milly had again, in reference to what her friend had already told her of this, her little tone of a moment before. "But Mrs. Condrip's own great point is that Aunt Maud herself won't hear of any such person. Mr. Densher, she holds—that's the way, at any rate, it was explained to me—won't ever be either a public man or a rich man. If he were public she'd be willing, as I understand, to help him; if he were rich—without being anything else—she'd do her best to swallow him. As it is she taboos him."

"In short," said Mrs. Stringham as with a private purpose, "she told you, the sister, all about it. But Mrs. Lowder likes him," she added.

"Mrs. Condrip didn't tell me that."

"Well, she does, all the same, my dear, extremely."

"Then there it is!" On which, with a drop and one of those sudden slightly sighing surrenders to a vague reflux and a general fatigue that had recently more than once marked themselves for her companion, Milly turned away. Yet the matter wasn't left so, that night, between them, albeit neither perhaps could afterwards have said which had first come back to it. Milly's own nearest approach at least, for a little, to doing so, was to remark that they appeared all—every one they saw—to think tremendously of money. This prompted in Susie a laugh, not untender, the innocent meaning of which was that it came, as a subject for indifference, money did, easier to some people than to others: she made the point in fairness, however, that you couldn't have told, by any too crude transparency of air, what place it held for Maud Manningham. She did her worldliness with grand proper silences—if it mightn't better be put perhaps that she did her detachment with grand occasional pushes. However Susie put it, in truth, she was really, in justice to herself, thinking of the difference, as favourites of fortune, between her old friend and her new. Aunt Maud sat somehow in the midst of her money, founded on it and surrounded by it, even if with a masterful high manner about it, her manner of looking, hard and bright, as if it weren't there. Milly, about hers, had no manner at all—which was

possibly, from a point of view, a fault: she was at any rate far away on the edge of it, and you hadn't, as might be said, in order to get at her nature, to traverse, by whatever avenue, any piece of her property. It was clear, on the other hand, that Mrs. Lowder was keeping her wealth as for purposes, imaginations, ambitions, that would figure as large, as honourably unselfish, on the day they should take effect. She would impose her will, but her will would be only that a person or two shouldn't lose a benefit by not submitting if they could be made to submit. To Milly, as so much younger, such far views couldn't be imputed: there was nobody she was supposable as interested for. It was too soon, since she wasn't interested for herself. Even the richest woman, at her age, lacked motive, and Milly's motive doubtless had plenty of time to arrive. She was meanwhile beautiful, simple, sublime without it—whether missing it and vaguely reaching out for it or not; and with it, for that matter, in the event, would really be these things just as much. Only then she might very well have, like Aunt Maud, a manner. Such were the connexions, at all events, in which the colloquy of our two ladies freshly flickered up—in which it came round that the elder asked the younger if she had herself, in the afternoon, named Mr. Densher as an acquaintance.

"Oh no—I said nothing of having seen him. I remembered," the girl explained, "Mrs. Lowder's wish."

"But that," her friend observed after a moment, "was for silence to Kate."

"Yes—but Mrs. Condrip would immediately have told Kate."

"Why soP—since she must dislike to talk about him."

"Mrs. Condrip must?" Milly thought. "What she would like most is that her sister should be brought to think ill of him; and if anything she can tell her will help that—" But the girl dropped suddenly here, as if her companion would see.

Her companion's interest, however, was all for what she herself saw. "You mean she'll immediately speak?" Mrs. Stringham gathered that this was what Milly meant, but it left still a question. "How will it be against him that you know him?"

"Oh how can I say? It won't be so much one's knowing him as one's having kept it out of sight."

"Ah," said Mrs. Stringham as for comfort, "you haven't kept it out of sight. Isn't it much rather Miss Croy herself who has?"

"It isn't my acquaintance with him," Milly smiled, "that she has dissimulated."

"She has dissimulated only her own? Well then the responsibility's hers."

"Ah but," said the girl, not perhaps with marked consequence, "she has a right to do as she likes."

"Then so, my dear, have you!" smiled Susan Shepherd.

Milly looked at her as if she were almost venerably simple, but also as if this were what one loved her for. "We're not quarrelling about it, Kate and I, yet."

"I only meant," Mrs. Stringham explained, "that I don't see what Mrs. Condrip would gain."

"By her being able to tell Kate?" Milly thought. "I only meant that I don't see what I myself should gain."

"But it will have to come out—that he knows you both—some time."

Milly scarce assented. "Do you mean when he comes back?"

"He'll find you both here, and he can hardly be looked to, I take it, to 'cut' either of you for the sake of the other."

This placed the question at last on a basis more distinctly cheerful. "I might get at him somehow beforehand," the girl suggested; "I might give him what they call here the 'tip'—that he's not to know me when we meet. Or, better still, I mightn't be here at all."

"Do you want to run away from him?"

It was, oddly enough, an idea Milly seemed half to accept. "I don't know *what* I want to run away from!"

It dispelled, on the spot—something, to the elder woman's ear, in the sad, sweet sound of it—any ghost of any need of explaining. The sense was constant for her that their relation might have been afloat, like some island of the south, in a great warm sea that represented, for every conceivable chance, a margin, an outer sphere, of general emotion; and the effect of the occurrence of anything in particular was to make the sea submerge the island, the margin flood the text. The great wave now for a moment swept over. "I'll go anywhere else in the world you like."

But Milly came up through it. “Dear old Susie—how I do work you!”

“Oh this is nothing yet.”

“No indeed -to what it will be.”

“You’re not—and it’s vain to pretend,” said dear old Susie, who had been taking her in, “as sound and strong as I insist on having you.”

“Insist, insist—the more the better. But the day I *look* as sound and strong as that, you know,” Milly went on—“on that day I shall be just sound and strong enough to take leave of you sweetly for ever. That’s where one is,” she continued thus agreeably to embroider, “when even one’s *most* ‘beaux moments’[x] aren’t such as to qualify, so far as appearance goes, for anything gayer than a handsome cemetery. Since I’ve lived all these years as if I were dead, I shall die, no doubt, as if I were alive—which will happen to be as you want me. So, you see,” she wound up, “you’ll never really know where I am. Except indeed when I’m gone; and then you’ll only know where I’m not.”

“I’d die for you,” said Susan Shepherd after a moment.

“ ‘Thanks awfully’! Then stay here for me.”

“But we can’t be in London for August, nor for many of all these next weeks.”

“Then we’ll go back.”

Susie blenched. “Back to America?”

“No, abroad—to Switzerland, Italy, anywhere. I mean by your staying ‘here’ for me,” Milly pursued, “your staying with me wherever I may be, even though we may neither of us know at the time where it is. No,” she insisted, “I *don’t* know where I am, and you never will, and it doesn’t matter—and I dare say it’s quite true,” she broke off, “that everything will have to come out.” Her friend would have felt of her that she joked about it now, hadn’t her scale from grave to gay been a thing of such unnameable shades that her contrasts were never sharp. She made up for failures of gravity by failures of mirth; if she hadn’t, that is, been at times as earnest as might have been liked, so she was certain not to be at other times as easy as she would like herself. “I must face the music. It isn’t at any rate its ‘coming out,’ ” she added; “it’s that Mrs. Condrip would put the fact before her to his injury”.

Her companion wondered. “But how to his?”

“Why if he pretends to love her—!”

“And does he only ‘pretend’?”

“I mean if, trusted by her in strange countries, he forgets her so far as to make up to other people.”

The amendment, however, brought Susie in, as with gaiety, for a comfortable end. “Did he make up, the false creature, to you?”

“No—but the question isn’t of that. It’s of what Kate might be made to believe.”

“That, given the fact of his having evidently more or less followed up his acquaintance with you, to say nothing of your obvious weird charm, he must have been all ready if you had a little bit led him on?”

Milly neither accepted nor qualified this; she only said after a moment and as with a conscious excess of the pensive: “No, I don’t think she’d quite wish to suggest that I made up to *him;* for that I should have had to do so would only bring out his constancy. All I mean is,” she added—and now at last as with a supreme impatience—“ that her being able to make him out a little a person who could give cause for jealousy would evidently help her, since she’s afraid of him, to do him in her sister’s mind a useful ill turn.”

Susan Shepherd perceived in this explanation such signs of an appetite for motive as would have sat gracefully even on one of her own New England heroines. It was seeing round several corners; but that was what New England heroines did, and it was moreover interesting for the moment to make out how many her young friend had actually undertaken to see round. Finally, too, weren’t they braving the deeps? They got their amusement where they could. “Isn’t it only,” she asked, “rather probable she’d see that Kate’s knowing him as (what’s the pretty old word?) *volage—?”*[y]

“Well?” She hadn’t filled out her idea, but neither, it seemed, could Milly.

“Well, might but do what that often does—by all *our* blessed littlelaws and arrangements at least: excite Kate’s own sentiment instead of depressing it.”

The idea was bright, yet the girl but beautifully stared. “Kate’s own sentiment? Oh she didn’t speak of that.

I don't think," she added as if she had been unconsciously giving a wrong impression, "I don't think Mrs. Condrip imagines she's in love."

It made Mrs. Stringham stare in turn. "Then what's her fear?"

"Well, only the fact of Mr. Densher's possibly himself keeping it up—the fear of some final result from *that."*

"Oh," said Susie, intellectually a little disconcerted—"she looks far ahead!"

At this, however, Milly threw off another of her sudden vague "sports." "No—it's only we who do."

"Well, don't let us be more interested for them than they are for themselves!"

"Certainly not"—the girl promptly assented. A certain interest nevertheless remained; she appeared to wish to be clear. "It wasn't of anything on Kate's own part she spoke."

"You mean she thinks her sister distinctly doesn't care for him?"

It was still as if, for an instant, Milly had to be sure of what she meant; but there it presently was. "If she did care Mrs. Condrip would have told me."

What Susan Shepherd seemed hereupon for a little to wonder was why then they had been talking so. "But did you ask her?"

"Ah no!"

"Oh!" said Susan Shepherd.

Milly, however, easily explained that she wouldn't have asked her for the world.

BOOK FIFTH

—I—

Lord Mark looked at her to-day in particular as if to wring from her a confession that she had originally done him injustice; and he was entitled to whatever there might be in it of advantage or merit that his intention really in a manner took effect: he cared about something, after all, sufficiently to make her feel absurdly as if she *were* confessing—all the while it was quite the case that neither justice nor injustice was what had been in question between them. He had presented himself at the hotel, had found her and had found Susan Shepherd at home, had been "civil" to Susan—it was just that shade, and Susan's fancy had fondly caught it; and then had come again and missed them, and then had come and found them once more: besides letting them easily see that if it hadn't by this time been the end of everything—which they could feel in the exhausted air, that of the season at its last gasp—the places they might have liked to go to were such as they would have had only to mention. Their feeling was—or at any rate their modest general plea—that there was no place they would have liked to go to; there was only the sense of finding they liked, wherever they were, the place to which they had been brought. Such was highly the case as to their current consciousness—which could be indeed, in an equally eminent degree, but a matter of course; impressions this afternoon having by a happy turn of their wheel been gathered for them into a splendid cluster, an offering like an armful of the rarest flowers. They were in presence of the offering—they had been led up to it; and if it had been still their habit to look at each other across distances for increase of unanimity his hand would have been silently named between them as the hand applied to the wheel. He had administered the touch that, under light analysis, made the difference—the difference of their not having lost, as Susie on the spot and at the hour phrased it again and again, both for herself and for such others as the question might concern, so beautiful and interesting an experience; the difference also, in fact, of Mrs. Lowder's not having lost it either, though it was superficially with Mrs. Lowder they had come, and though it was further with that lady that our young woman was directly engaged during the half-hour or so of her most agreeably inward response to the scene.

The great historic house[z] had, for Milly, beyond terrace and garden, as the centre of an almost extravagantly grand Watteau-composition, a tone as of old gold kept "down" by the quality of the air, summer full-flushed but attuned to the general perfect taste. Much, by her measure, for the previous hour, appeared, in connexion with this revelation of it, to have happened to her—a quantity expressed in introductions of charming new people, in walks through halls of armour, of pictures, of cabinets, of tapestry, of tea-tables, in an assault of reminders that this largeness of style was the sign of *appointed* felicity. The largeness of style was the great containing vessel, while everything else, the pleasant personal affluence, the easy murmurous welcome, the honoured age of illustrious host and hostess, all at once so distinguished and so plain, so public and so shy, became but this or that element of the infusion. The elements melted together and seasoned the draught, the essence of which might have struck the girl as distilled into the small cup of iced coffee she had vaguely accepted from somebody, while a fuller flood somehow kept bearing her up—all the freshness of response of her young life, the freshness of the first and only prime. What had perhaps brought on just now a kind of climax was the fact of her appearing to make out, through Aunt Maud, what was really the matter. It couldn't be less than a climax for a poor shaky maiden to find it put to her of a sudden that she herself was the matter—for that was positively what, on Mrs. Lowder's part, it came to. Everything was great, of course, in great pictures, and it was doubtless precisely a part of the brilliant life—since the brilliant life, as one had faintly figured it, just was humanly led—that all impressions within its area partook of its brilliancy; still, letting that pass, it fairly stamped an hour as with the official seal for one to be able to take in so comfortably one's companion's broad blandness. "You must stay among us—you must stay; anything else is impossible and ridiculous; you don't know yet, no doubt—you can't; but you will soon enough: you can stay in *any* position." It had been as the murmurous consecration to follow the murmurous welcome; and even if it were but part of Aunt Maud's own spiritual ebriety—for the dear woman, one could see, was spiritually "keeping" the day—it served to Milly, then and afterwards, as a high-water mark of the imagination.

It was to be the end of the short parenthesis which had begun but the other day at Lancaster Gate with Lord Mark's informing her that she was a "success"—the key thus again struck; and though no distinct, no numbered revelations had crowded in, there had, as we have seen, been plenty of incident for the space and the time. There had been thrice as much, and all gratuitous and genial—if, in portions, not exactly hitherto the revelation—as three unprepared weeks could have been expected to produce. Mrs. Lowder had improvised

a “rush” for them, but out of elements, as Milly was now a little more freely aware, somewhat roughly combined. Therefore if at this very instant she had her reasons for thinking of the parenthesis as about to close —reasons completely personal—she had on behalf of her companion a divination almost as deep. The parenthesis would close with this admirable picture, but the admirable picture still would show Aunt Maud as not absolutely sure either if she herself were destined to remain in it. What she was doing, Milly might even not have escaped seeming to see, was to talk herself into a sublimer serenity while she ostensibly talked Milly. It was fine, the girl fully felt, the way she did talk *her,* little as, at bottom, our young woman needed it or found other persuasions at fault. It was in particular during the minutes of her grateful absorption of iced coffee—qualified by a sharp doubt of her wisdom—that she most had in view Lord Mark’s relation to her being there, or at least to the question of her being amused at it. It wouldn’t have taken much by the end of five minutes quite to make her feel that this relation was charming. It might, once more, simply have been that everything, anything, was charming when one was so justly and completely charmed; but, frankly, she hadn’t supposed anything so serenely sociable could settle itself between them as the friendly understanding that was at present somehow in the air. They were, many of them together, near the marquee that had been erected on a stretch of sward as a temple of refreshment and that happened to have the property—which was all to the good—of making Milly think of a “durbar”;[aa] her iced coffee had been a consequence of this connexion, through which, further, the bright company scattered about fell thoroughly into place. Certain of its members might have represented the contingent of “native princes”—familiar, but scarce the less grandly gregarious term!—and Lord Mark would have done for one of these even though for choice he but presented himself as a supervisory friend of the family. The Lancaster Gate family, he clearly intended, in which he included its American recruits, and included above all Kate Croy—a young person blessedly easy to take care of. She knew people, and people knew her, and she was the handsomest thing there—this last a declaration made by Milly, in a sort of soft midsummer madness, a straight skylark-flight of charity, to Aunt Maud.

Kate had for her new friend’s eyes the extraordinary and attaching property of appearing at a given moment to show as a beautiful stranger, to cut her connexions and lose her identity, letting the imagination for the time make what it would of them—make her merely a person striking from afar, more and more pleasing as one watched, but who was above all a subject for curiosity. Nothing could have given her, as a party to a relation, a greater freshness than this sense, which sprang up at its own hours, of one’s being as curious about her as if one hadn’t known her. It had sprung up, we have gathered, as soon as Milly had seen her after hearing from Mrs. Stringham of her knowledge of Merton Densher; she had looked then other and, as Milly knew the real critical mind would call it, more objective; and our young woman had foreseen it of her on the spot that she would often look so again. It was exactly what she was doing this afternoon; and Milly, who had amusements of thought that were like the secrecies of a little girl playing with dolls when conventionally “too big,” could almost settle to the game of what one would suppose her, how one would place her, if one didn’t know her. She became thus, intermittently, a figure conditioned only by the great facts of aspect, a figure to be waited for, named and fitted. This was doubtless but a way of feeling that it was of her essence to be peculiarly what the occasion, whatever it might be, demanded when its demand was highest. There were probably ways enough, on these lines, for such a consciousness; another of them would be for instance to say that she was made for great social uses. Milly wasn’t wholly sure she herself knew what great social uses might be—unless, as a good example, to exert just that sort of glamour in just that sort of frame were one of them: she would have fallen back on knowing sufficiently that they existed at all events for her friend. It imputed a primness, all round, to be reduced but to saying, by way of a translation of one’s amusement, that she was always so *right*—since that, too often, was what the *insupportables*[ab] themselves were; yet it was, in overflow to Aunt Maud, what she had to content herself withal—save for the lame enhancement of saying she was lovely, it served, despite everything, the purpose, strengthened the bond that for the time held the two ladies together, distilled in short its drop of rose-colour for Mrs. Lowder’s own view. That was really the view Milly had, for most of the rest of the occasion, to give herself to immediately taking in; but it didn’t prevent the continued play of those swift cross-lights, odd beguilements of the mind, at which we have already glanced.

Mrs. Lowder herself found it enough simply to reply, in respect to Kate, that she was indeed a luxury to take about the world: she expressed no more surprise than that at her “rightness” today. Didn’t it by this time sufficiently shine out that it was precisely as the very luxury she was proving that she had, from far back, been appraised and waited for? Crude elation, however, might be kept at bay, and the circumstance none the less made clear that they were all swimming together in the blue. It came back to Lord Mark again, as he seemed slowly to pass and repass and conveniently to linger before them; he was personally the note of the blue—like a suspended skein of silk within reach of the broiderer’s hand. Aunt Maud’s free-moving shuttle took a length of him at rhythmic intervals; and one of the accessory truths that flickered across to Milly was that he ever so consentingly knew he was being worked in. This was almost like an understanding with her at Mrs. Lowder’s expense, which she would have none of; she wouldn’t for the world have had him make any such point as that he wouldn’t have launched them at Matcham—or whatever it was he had done—only for Aunt Maud’s *beaux yeux*.[ac] What he had done, it would have been guessable, was something he had for some

time been desired in vain to do; and what they were all now profiting by was a change comparatively sudden, the cessation of hope delayed. What had caused the cessation easily showed itself as none of Milly's business; and she was luckily, for that matter, in no real danger of hearing from him directly that her individual weight had been felt in the scale. Why then indeed was it an effect of his diffused but subdued participation that he might absolutely have been saying to her "Yes, let the dear woman take her own tone"? "Since she's here she may stay," he might have been adding—"for whatever she can make of it. But you and I are different." Milly knew *she* was different in truth—his own difference was his own affair; but also she knew that after all, even at their distinctest, Lord Mark's "tips" in this line would be tacit. He practically placed her—it came round again to that—under no obligation whatever. It was a matter of equal ease, moreover, her letting Mrs. Lowder take a tone. She might have taken twenty—they would have spoiled nothing.

"You must stay on with us; you can, you know, in any position you like; any, any, *any,* my dear child"—and her emphasis went deep. "You must make your home with us; and it's really open to you to make the most beautiful one in the world. You mustn't be under a mistake—under any of any sort; and you must let us all think for you a little, take care of you and watch over you. Above all you must help me with Kate, and you must stay a little *for* her; nothing for a long time has happened to me so good as that you and she should have become friends. It's beautiful; it's great; it's everything. What makes it perfect is that it should have come about through our dear delightful Susie, restored to me, after so many years, by such a miracle. No—that's more charming to me than even your hitting it off with Kate. God has been good to one—positively; for I couldn't, at my age, have made a new friend—undertaken, I mean, out of whole cloth, the real thing. It's like changing one's bankers—after fifty: one doesn't do that. That's why Susie has been kept for me, as you seem to keep people in your wonderful country, in lavender and pink paper—coming back at last as straight as out of a fairy-tale and with you as an attendant fairy." Milly hereupon replied appreciatively that such a description of herself made her feel as if pink paper were her dress and lavender its trimming; but Aunt Maud wasn't to be deterred by a weak joke from keeping it up. The young person under her protection could feel besides that she kept it up in perfect sincerity. She was somehow at this hour a very happy woman, and a part of her happiness might precisely have been that her affections and her views were moving as never before in concert. Unquestionably she loved Susie; but she also loved Kate and loved Lord Mark, loved their funny old host and hostess, loved every one within range, down to the very servant who came to receive Milly's empty ice-plate-down, for that matter, to Milly herself, who was, while she talked, really conscious of the enveloping flap of a protective mantle, a shelter with the weight of an Eastern carpet. An Eastern carpet, for wishing-purposes of one's own, was a thing to be on rather than under; still, however, if the girl should fail of breath it wouldn't be, she could feel, by Mrs. Lowder's fault. One of the last things she was afterwards to recall of this was Aunt Maud's going on to say that she and Kate must stand together because together they could do anything. It was for Kate of course she was essentially planning; but the plan, enlarged and uplifted now, somehow required Milly's prosperity too for its full operation, just as Milly's prosperity at the same time involved Kate's. It was nebulous yet, it was slightly confused, but it was comprehensive and genial, and it made our young woman understand things Kate had said of her aunt's possibilities, as well as characterisations that had fallen from Susan Shepherd. One of the most frequent on the lips of the latter had been that dear Maud was a grand natural force.

—II—

A prime reason, we must add, why sundry impressions were not to be fully present to the girl till later on was that they yielded at this stage, with an effect of sharp supersession, to a detached quarter of an hour—her only one—with Lord Mark. "Have you seen the picture in the house, the beautiful one that's so like you?"—he was asking that as he stood before her; having come up at last with his smooth intimation that any wire he had pulled and yet wanted not to remind her of wasn't quite a reason for his having no joy at all.

"I've been through rooms and I've seen pictures. But if I'm 'like' anything so beautiful as most of them seemed to me—!" It needed in short for Milly some evidence which he only wanted to supply. She was the image of the wonderful Bronzino,[ad] which she must have a look at on every ground. He had thus called her off and led her away; the more easily that the house within was above all what had already drawn round her its mystic circle. Their progress meanwhile was not of the straightest; it was an advance, without haste, through innumerable natural pauses and soft concussions, determined for the most part by the appearance before them of ladies and gentlemen, singly, in couples, in clusters, who brought them to a stand with an inveterate "I say, Mark." What they said she never quite made out; it was their all so domestically knowing him, and his knowing them, that mainly struck her, while her impression, for the rest, was but of fellow strollers more vaguely afloat than themselves, supernumeraries mostly a little battered, whether as jaunty males or as ostensibly elegant women. They might have been moving a good deal by a momentum that had begun far

back, but they were still brave and personable, still warranted for continuance as long again, and they gave her, in especial collectively, a sense of pleasant voices, pleasanter than those of actors, of friendly empty words and kind lingering eyes that took somehow pardonable liberties. The lingering eyes looked her over, the lingering eyes were what went, in almost confessed simplicity, with the pointless “I say, Mark”; and what was really most flagrant of all was that, as a pleasant matter of course, if she didn’t mind, he seemed to suggest their letting people, poor dear things, have the benefit of her.

The odd part was that he made her herself believe, for amusement, in the benefit, measured by him in mere manner—for wonderful, of a truth, was, as a means of expression, his slightness of emphasis—that her present good nature conferred. It was, as she could easily see, a mild common carnival of good nature—a mass of London people together, of sorts and sorts, but who mainly knew each other and who, in their way, did, no doubt, confess to curiosity. It had gone round that she was there; questions about her would be passing; the easiest thing was to run the gauntlet with him—just as the easiest thing was in fact to trust him generally. Couldn’t she know for herself, passively, how little harm they meant her?—to that extent that it made no difference whether or not he introduced them. The strangest thing of all for Milly was perhaps the uplifted assurance and indifference with which she could simply give back the particular bland stare that appeared in such cases to mark civilisation at its highest. It was so little her fault, this oddity of what had “gone round” about her, that to accept it without question might be as good a way as another of feeling life. It was inevitable to supply the probable description—that of the awfully rich young American who was so queer to behold, but nice, by all accounts, to know; and she had really but one instant of speculation as to fables or fantasies perchance originally launched. She asked herself once only if Susie could, inconceivably, have been blatant about her; for the question, on the spot, was really blown away for ever. She knew in fact on the spot and with sharpness just why she had “elected” Susan Shepherd: she had had from the first hour the conviction of her being precisely the person in the world least possibly a trumpeter. So it wasn’t their fault, it wasn’t their fault, and anything might happen that would, and everything now again melted together, and kind eyes were always kind eyes—if it were never to be worse than that! She got with her companion into the house; they brushed, beneficently, past all their accidents. The Bronzino was, it appeared, deep within, and the long afternoon light lingered for them on patches of old colour and waylaid them, as they went, in nooks and opening vistas.

It was all the while for Milly as if Lord Mark had really had something other than this spoken pretext in view; as if there were something he wanted to say to her and were only—consciously yet not awkwardly, just delicately—hanging fire. At the same time it was as if the thing had practically been said by the moment they came in sight of the picture; since what it appeared to amount to was “Do let a fellow who isn’t a fool take care of you a little.” The thing somehow, with the aid of the Bronzino, was done; it hadn’t seemed to matter to her before if he were a fool or no; but now, just where they were, she liked his not being; and it was all moreover none the worse for coming back to something of the same sound as Mrs. Lowder’s so recent reminder. She too wished to take care of her—and wasn’t it, *à peu près,*[ae] what all the people with the kind eyes were wishing? Once more things melted together—the beauty and the history and the facility and the splendid midsummer glow: it was a sort of magnificent maximum, the pink dawn of an apotheosis coming so curiously soon. What in fact befell was that, as she afterwards made out, it was Lord Mark who said nothing in particular—it was she herself who said all. She couldn’t help that—it came; and the reason it came was that she found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair—as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own.[af] The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognised her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. “I shall never be better than this.”

He smiled for her at the portrait. “Than she? You’d scarce need to be better, for surely that’s well enough. But you *are,* one feels, as it happens, better; because, splendid as she is, one doubts if she was good.”

He hadn’t understood. She was before the picture, but she had turned to him, and she didn’t care if for the minute he noticed her tears. It was probably as good a moment as she should ever have with him. It was perhaps as good a moment as she should have with any one, or have in any connexion whatever. “I mean that everything this afternoon has been too beautiful, and that perhaps everything together will never be so right again. I’m very glad therefore you’ve been a part of it.”

Though he still didn’t understand her he was as nice as if he had; he didn’t ask for insistence, and that was just a part of his looking after her. He simply protected her now from herself, and there was a world of practice in it. “Oh we must talk about these things!”

Ah they had already done that, she knew, as much as she ever would; and she was shaking her head at her

pale sister the next moment with a world, on her side, of slowness. “I wish I could see the resemblance. Of course her complexion’s green,” she laughed; “but mine’s several shades greener.”[12]

“It’s down to the very hands,” said Lord Mark.

“Her hands are large,” Milly went on, “but mine are larger. Mine are huge.”

“Oh you go her, all round, ‘one better’—which is just what I said. But you’re a pair. You must surely catch it,” he added as if it were important to his character as a serious man not to appear to have invented his plea.

“I don’t know—one never knows one’s self. It’s a funny fancy, and I don’t imagine it would have occurred —”

“I see it has occurred”—he had already taken her up. She had her back, as she faced the picture, to one of the doors of the room, which was open, and on her turning as he spoke she saw that they were in the presence of three other persons, also, as appeared, interested enquirers. Kate Croy was one of these; Lord Mark had just become aware of her, and she, all arrested, had immediately seen, and made the best of it, that she was far from being first in the field. She had brought a lady and a gentleman to whom she wished to show what Lord Mark was showing Milly, and he took her straightway as a re-enforcement. Kate herself had spoken, however, before he had had time to tell her so.

“You had noticed too?”—she smiled at him without looking at Milly. “Then I’m not original—which one always hopes one has been. But the likeness is so great.” And now she looked at Milly—for whom again it was, all round indeed, kind, kind eyes. “Yes, there you are, my dear, if you want to know. And you’re superb.” She took now but a glance at the picture, though it was enough to make her question to her friends not too straight. “Isn’t she superb?”

“I brought Miss Theale,” Lord Mark explained to the latter, “quite off my own bat.”

“I wanted Lady Aldershaw,” Kate continued to Milly, “to see for herself.”

“Les grands esprits se rencontrent!”[ag] laughed her attendant gentleman, a high but slightly stooping, shambling and wavering person who represented urbanity by the liberal aid of certain prominent front teeth and whom Milly vaguely took for some sort of great man.

Lady Aldershaw meanwhile looked at Milly quite as if Milly had been the Bronzino and the Bronzino only Milly. “Superb, superb. Of course I had noticed you. It is wonderful,” she went on with her back to the picture, but with some other eagerness which Milly felt gathering, felt directing her motions now. It was enough—they were introduced, and she was saying “I wonder if you could give us the pleasure of coming—” She wasn’t fresh, for she wasn’t young, even though she denied at every pore that she was old; but she was vivid and much bejewelled for the midsummer daylight; and she was all in the palest pinks and blues. She didn’t think, at this pass, that she could “come” anywhere—Milly didn’t; and she already knew that somehow Lord Mark was saving her from the question. He had interposed, taking the words out of the lady’s mouth and not caring at all if the lady minded. That was clearly the right way to treat her—at least for him; as she had only dropped, smiling, and then turned away with him. She had been dealt with—it would have done an enemy good. The gentleman still stood, a little helpless, addressing himself to the intention of urbanity as if it were a large loud whistle; he had been sighing sympathy, in his way, while the lady made her overture; and Milly had in this light soon arrived at their identity. They were Lord and Lady Aldershaw, and the wife was the clever one. A minute or two later the situation had changed, and she knew it afterwards to have been by the subtle operation of Kate. She was herself saying that she was afraid she must go now if Susie could be found; but she was sitting down on the nearest seat to say it. The prospect, through opened doors, stretched before her into other rooms, down the vista of which Lord Mark was strolling with Lady Aldershaw, who, close to him and much intent, seemed to show from behind as peculiarly expert. Lord Aldershaw, for his part, had been left in the middle of the room, while Kate, with her back to him, was standing before her with much sweetness of manner. The sweetness was all for *her;* she had the sense of the poor gentleman’s having somehow been handled as Lord Mark had handled his wife. He dangled there, he shambled a little; then he bethought himself of the Bronzino, before which, with his eye-glass, he hovered. It drew from him an odd vague sound, not wholly distinct from a grunt, and a “Humph—most remarkable!” which lighted Kate’s face with amusement. The next moment he had creaked away over polished floors after the others and Milly was feeling as if *she* had been rude. But Lord Aldershaw was in every way a detail and Kate was saying to her that she hoped she wasn’t ill.

Thus it was that, aloft there in the great gilded historic chamber and the presence of the pale personage on the wall, whose eyes all the while seemed engaged with her own, she found herself suddenly sunk in something quite intimate and humble and to which these grandeurs were strange enough witnesses. It had come up, in the form in which she had had to accept it, all suddenly, and nothing about it, at the same time, was more marked than that she had in a manner plunged into it to escape from something else. Something

else, from her first vision of her friend's appearance three minutes before, had been present to her even through the call made by the others on her attention; something that was perversely *there,* she was more and more uncomfortably finding, at least for the first moments and by some spring of its own, with every renewal of their meeting. "Is it the way she looks to *him?"* she asked herself—the perversity being how she kept in remembrance that Kate was known to him. It wasn't a fault in Kate—nor in him assuredly; and she had a horror, being generous and tender, of treating either of them as if it had been. To Densher himself she couldn't make it up—he was too far away; but her secondary impulse was to make it up to Kate. She did so now with a strange soft energy—the impulse immediately acting. "Will you render me to-morrow a great service?"

"Any service, dear child, in the world."

"But it's a secret one—nobody must know. I must be wicked and false about it."

"Then I'm your woman," Kate smiled, "for that's the kind of thing I love. *Do* let us do something bad. You're impossibly without sin, you know."

Milly's eyes, on this, remained a little with their companion's. "Ah I shan't perhaps come up to your idea. It's only to deceive Susan Shepherd."

"Oh!" said Kate as if this were indeed mild.

"But thoroughly—as thoroughly as I can."

"And for cheating," Kate asked, "my powers will contribute?

Well, I'll do my best for you." In accordance with which it was presently settled between them that Milly should have the aid and comfort of her presence for a visit to Sir Luke Strett. Kate had needed a minute for enlightenment, and it was quite grand for her comrade that this name should have said nothing to her. To Milly herself it had for some days been secretly saying much. The personage in question was, as she explained, the greatest of medical lights—if she had got hold, as she believed (and she had used to this end the wisdom of the serpent) of the right, the special man. She had written to him three days before, and he had named her an hour, eleven-twenty; only it had come to her on the eve that she couldn't go alone. Her maid on the other hand wasn't good enough, and Susie was too good. Kate had listened above all with high indulgence. "And I'm betwixt and between, happy thought! Too good for what?"

Milly thought. "Why to be worried if it's nothing. And to be still more worried—I mean before she need be—if it isn't."

Kate fixed her with deep eyes. "What in the world is the matter with you?" It had inevitably a sound of impatience, as if it had been a challenge really to produce something; so that Milly felt her for the moment only as a much older person, standing above her a little, doubting the imagined ailments, suspecting the easy complaints, of ignorant youth. It somewhat checked her, further, that the matter with her was what exactly as yet she wanted knowledge about; and she immediately declared, for conciliation, that if she were merely fanciful Kate would see her put to shame. Kate vividly uttered, in return, the hope that, since she could come out and be so charming, could so universally dazzle and interest, she wasn't all the while in distress or in anxiety—didn't believe herself to be in any degree seriously menaced. "Well, I want to make out—to make out!" was all that this consistently produced. To which Kate made clear answer: "Ah then let us by all means!"

"I thought," Milly said, "you'd like to help me. But I must ask you, please, for the promise of absolute silence."

"And how, if you *are* ill, can your friends remain in ignorance?"

"Well, if I am it must of course finally come out. But I can go for a long time." Milly spoke with her, eyes again on her painted sister's—almost as if under their suggestion. She still sat there before Kate, yet not without a light in her face. "That will be one of my advantages. I think I could die without its being noticed."

"You're an extraordinary young woman," her friend, visibly held by her, declared at last. "What a remarkable time to talk of such things!"

"Well, we won't talk, precisely"—Milly got herself together again. "I only wanted to make sure of you."

"Here in the midst of—!" But Kate could only sigh for wonder—almost visibly too for pity.

It made a moment during which her companion waited on her word; partly as if from a yearning, shy but deep, to have her case put to her just as Kate was struck by it; partly as if the hint of pity were already giving a sense to her whimsical "shot," with Lord Mark, at Mrs. Lowder's first dinner. Exactly this—the handsome girl's compassionate manner, her friendly descent from her own strength—was what she had then foretold. She took Kate up as if positively for the deeper taste of it. "Here in the midst of what?"

“Of everything. There’s nothing you can’t have. There’s nothing you can’t do.”

“So Mrs. Lowder tells me.”

It just kept Kate’s eyes fixed as possibly for more of that; then, however, without waiting, she went on. “We all adore you.”

“You’re wonderful—you dear things!” Milly laughed.

“No, it’s you.” And Kate seemed struck with the real interest of it. “In three weeks!”

Milly kept it up. “Never were people on such terms! All the more reason,” she added, “that I shouldn’t needlessly torment you.”

“But me? what becomes of *me?”* said Kate.

“Well, you”—Milly thought—“if there’s anything to bear you’ll bear it.”

“But I won’t bear it!” said Kate Croy.

“Oh yes you will: all the same! You’ll pity me awfully, but you’ll help me very much. And I absolutely trust you. So there we are.” There they were then, since Kate had so to take it; but there, Milly felt, she herself in particular was; for it was just the point at which she had wished to arrive. She had wanted to prove to herself that she didn’t horribly blame her friend for any reserve; and what better proof could there be than this quite special confidence? If she desired to show Kate that she really believed Kate liked her, could she show it more than by asking her help?

—III—

What it really came to, on the morrow, this first time—the time Kate went with her—was that the great man had, a little, to excuse himself; had, by a rare accident—for he kept his consulting-hours in general rigorously free—but ten minutes to give her; ten mere minutes which he yet placed at her service in a manner that she admired still more than she could meet it: so crystal-clean the great empty cup of attention that he set between them on the table. He was presently to jump into his carriage, but he promptly made the point that he must see her again, see her within a day or two; and he named for her at once another hour—easing her off beautifully too even then in respect to her possibly failing of justice to her errand. The minutes affected her in fact as ebbing more swiftly than her little army of items could muster, and they would probably have gone without her doing much more than secure another hearing, hadn’t it been for her sense, at the last, that she had gained above all an impression. The impression—all the sharp growth of the final few moments—was neither more nor less than that she might make, of a sudden, in quite another world, another straight friend, and a friend who would moreover be, wonderfully, the most appointed, the most thoroughly adjusted of the whole collection, inasmuch as he would somehow wear the character scientifically, ponderably, proveably—not just loosely and sociably. Literally, furthermore, it wouldn’t really depend on herself, Sir Luke Strett’s friendship, in the least: perhaps what made her most stammer and pant was its thus queerly coming over her that she might find she had interested him even beyond her intention, find she was in fact launched in some current that would lose itself in the sea of science. At the same time that she struggled, however, she also surrendered; there was a moment at which she almost dropped the form of stating, of explaining, and threw herself, without violence, only with a supreme pointless quaver that had turned the next instant to an intensity of interrogative stillness, upon his general good will. His large settled face, though firm, was not, as she had thought at first, hard; he looked, in the oddest manner, to her fancy, half like a general and half like a bishop, and she was soon sure that, within some such handsome range, what it would show her would be what was good, what was best for her. She had established, in other words, in this time-saving way, a relation with it; and the relation was the special trophy that, for the hour, she bore off. It was like an absolute possession, a new resource altogether, something done up in the softest silk and tucked away under the arm of memory. She hadn’t had it when she went in, and she had it when she came out, she had it there under her cloak, but dissimulated, invisibly carried, when smiling, smiling, she again faced Kate Croy. That young lady had of course awaited her in another room, where, as the great man was to absent himself, no one else was in attendance; and she rose for her with such a face of sympathy as might have graced the vestibule of a dentist. “Is it out?” she seemed to ask as if it had been a question of a tooth; and Milly indeed kept her in no suspense at all.

“He’s a dear. I’m to come again.”

“But what does he say?”

Milly was almost gay. “That I’m not to worry about anything in the world, and that if I’ll be a good girl and do exactly what he tells me he’ll take care of me for ever and ever.”

Kate wondered as if things scarce fitted. “But does he allow then that you’re ill?”

“I don’t know what he allows, and I don’t care. I *shall* know, and whatever it is it will be enough. He knows all about me, and I like it. I don’t hate it a bit.”

Still, however, Kate stared. “But could he, in so few minutes, ask you enough—?”

“He asked me scarcely anything—he doesn’t need to do anything so stupid,” Milly said. “He can tell. He knows,” she repeated; “and when I go back—for he’ll have thought me over a little—it will be all right.”

Kate after a moment made the best of this. “Then when are we to come?”

It just pulled her friend up, for even while they talked—at least it was one of the reasons—she stood there suddenly, irrelevantly, in the light of her other identity, the identity she would have for Mr. Densher. This was always, from one instant to another, an incalculable light, which, though it might go off faster than it came on, necessarily disturbed. It sprang, with a perversity all its own, from the fact that, with the lapse of hours and days, the chances themselves that made for his being named continued so oddly to fail. There were twenty, there were fifty, but none of them turned up. This in particular was of course not a juncture at which the least of them would naturally be present; but it would make, none the less, Milly saw, another day practically all stamped with avoidance. She saw in a quick glimmer, and with it all Kate’s unconsciousness; and then she shook off the obsession. But it had lasted long enough to qualify her response. No, she had shown Kate how she trusted her; and that, for loyalty, would somehow do. “Oh, dear thing, now that the ice is broken I shan’t trouble you again.”[13] “You’ll come alone?” “Without a scruple. Only I shall ask you, please, for your absolute discretion still.”

Outside, at a distance from the door, on the wide pavement of the great contiguous square, they had to wait again while their carriage, which Milly had kept, completed a further turn of exercise, engaged in by the coachman for reasons of his own. The footman was there and had indicated that he was making the circuit; so Kate went on while they stood. “But don’t you ask a good deal, darling, in proportion to what you give?”

This pulled Milly up still shorter—so short in fact that she yielded as soon as she had taken it in. But she continued to smile. “I see. Then you *can* tell.”

“I don’t want to ‘tell,’” said Kate. “I’ll be as silent as the tomb if I can only have the truth from you. All I want is that you shouldn’t keep from me how you find out that you really are.”

“Well then I won’t ever. But you see for yourself,” Milly went on, “how I really am. I’m satisfied. I’m happy.”

Kate looked at her long. “I believe you like it. The way things turn out for you—!”

Milly met her look now without a thought of anything but the spoken. She had ceased to be Mr. Densher’s image; she stood for nothing but herself, and she was none the less fine. Still, still, what had passed was a fair bargain and it would do. “Of course I like it. I feel—I can’t otherwise describe it—as if I had been on my knees to the priest. I’ve confessed and I’ve been absolved. It has been lifted off.”

Kate’s eyes never quitted her. “He must have liked you.”

“Oh—doctors!” Milly said. “But I hope,” she added, “he didn’t like me too much.” Then as if to escape a little from her friend’s deeper sounding, or as impatient for the carriage, not yet in sight, her eyes, turning away, took in the great stale square. As its staleness, however, was but that of London fairly fatigued, the late hot London with its dance all danced and its story all told, the air seemed a thing of blurred pictures and mixed echoes, and an impression met the sense—an impression that broke the next moment through the girl’s tightened lips. “Oh it’s a beautiful big world, and every one, yes, every one—!” it presently brought her back to Kate, and she hoped she didn’t actually look as much as if she were crying as she must have looked to Lord Mark among the portraits at Matcham.[ah]

Kate at all events understood. “Every one wants to be so nice?”

“So nice,” said the grateful Milly.

“Oh,” Kate laughed, “we’ll pull you through! And won’t you now bring Mrs. Stringham?”

But Milly after an instant was again clear about that. “Not till I’ve seen him once more.”

She was to have found this preference, two days later, abundantly justified; and yet when, in prompt accordance with what had passed between them, she reappeared before her distinguished friend—that character having for him in the interval built itself up still higher—the first thing he asked her was whether

she had been accompanied. She told him, on this, straightway, every-thing;completely free at present from her first embarrassment, disposed even-as she felt she might become—to undue volubility, and conscious moreover of no alarm from his thus perhaps wishing she had not come alone. It was exactly as if, in the forty-eight hours that had passed, her acquaintance with him had somehow increased and his own knowledge in particular received mysterious additions. They had been together, before, scarce ten minutes; but the relation, the one the ten minutes had so beautifully created, was there to take straight up: and this not, on his own part, from mere professional heartiness, mere bedside manner, which she would have disliked—much rather from a quiet pleasant air in him of having positively asked about her, asked here and asked there and found out. Of course he couldn't in the least have asked, or have wanted to; there was no source of information to his hand, and he had really needed none: he had found out simply by his genius—and found out, she meant, literally everything. Now she knew not only that she didn't dislike this—the state of being found out about; but that on the contrary it was truly what she had come for, and that for the time at least it would give her something firm to stand on. She struck herself as aware, aware as she had never been, of really not having had from the beginning anything firm. It would be strange for the firmness to come, after all, from her learning in these agreeable conditions that she was in some way doomed; but above all it would prove how little she had hitherto had to hold her up. If she was now to be held up by the mere process—since that was perhaps on the cards—of being let down, this would only testify in turn to her queer little history. *That* sense of loosely rattling had been no process at all; and it was ridiculously true that her thus sitting there to see her life put into the scales represented her first approach to the taste of orderly living. Such was Milly's romantic version—that her life, especially by the fact of this second interview, was put into the scales; and just the best part of the relation established might have been, for that matter, that the great grave charming man knew, had known at once, that it was romantic, and in that measure allowed for it. Her only doubt, her only fear, was whether he perhaps wouldn't even take advantage of her being a little romantic to treat her as romantic altogether. This doubtless was her danger with him; but she should see, and dangers in general meanwhile dropped and dropped.

The very place, at the end of a few minutes, the commodious "handsome" room, far back in the fine old house, soundless from position, somewhat sallow with years of celebrity, somewhat sombre even at midsummer—the very place put on for her a look of custom and use, squared itself solidly round her as with promises and certainties. She had come forth to see the world, and this then was to be the world's light, the rich dusk of a London "back," these the world's walls, those the world's curtains and carpet. She should be intimate with the great bronze clock and mantel-ornaments, conspicuously presented in gratitude and long ago; she should be as one of the circle of eminent contemporaries, photographed, engraved, signatured, and in particular framed and glazed, who made up the rest of the decoration, and made up as well so much of the human comfort; and while she thought of all the clean truths, un-fringed, unfingered, that the listening stillness, strained into pauses and waits, would again and again, for years, have kept distinct, she also wondered what *she* would eventually decide upon to present in gratitude. She would give something better at least than the brawny Victorian bronzes. This was precisely an instance of what she felt he knew of her before he had done with her: that she was secretly romancing at that rate, in the midst of so much else that was more urgent, all over the place. So much for her secrets with him, none of which really required to be phrased. It would have been thoroughly a secret for her from any one else that without a dear lady she had picked up just before coming over she wouldn't have a decently near connexion of any sort, for such an appeal as she was making, to put forward: no one in the least, as it were, to produce for respectability. But *his* seeing it she didn't mind a scrap, and not a scrap either his knowing how she had left the dear lady in the dark. She had come alone, putting her friend off with a fraud: giving a pretext of shops, of a whim, of she didn't know what—the amusement of being for once in the streets by herself. The streets by herself were new to her—she had always had in them a companion or a maid; and he was never to believe moreover that she couldn't take full in the face anything he might have to say. He was softly amused at her account of her courage; though he yet showed it somehow without soothing her too grossly. Still, he did want to know whom she had. Hadn't there been a lady with her on Wednesday?

"Yes—a different one. Not the one who's travelling with me. I've told *her."*

Distinctly he was amused, and it added to his air—the greatest charm of all—of giving her lots of time. "You've told her what?"

"Well," said Milly, "that I visit you in secret."

"And how many persons will she tell?"

"Oh she's devoted. Not one."

"Well, if she's devoted doesn't that make another friend for you?"

It didn't take much computation, but she nevertheless had to think a moment, conscious as she was that he distinctly *would* want to fill out his notion of her—even a little, as it were, to warm the air for her. That

however—and better early than late - he must accept as of no use; and she herself felt for an instant quite a competent certainty on the subject of any such warming. The air, for Milly Theale, was, from the very nature of the case, destined never to rid itself of a considerable chill. This she could tell him with authority, if she could tell him nothing else; and she seemed to see now, in short, that it would importantly simplify. “Yes, it makes another; but they all together wouldn’t make—well, I don’t know what to call it but the difference. I mean when one !s—really alone. I’ve never seen anything like the kindness.” She pulled up a minute while he waited—and waited again as if with his reasons for letting her, for almost making her, talk. What she herself wanted was not, for the third time, to cry, as it were, in public. She had never seen anything like the kindness, and she wished to do it justice; but she knew what she was about, and justice was not wronged by her being able presently to stick to her point. “Only one’s situation is what it is. It’s *me* it concerns. The rest is delightful and useless. Nobody can really help. That’s why I’m by myself to-day. I *want* to be—in spite of Miss Croy, who came with me last. If you can help, so much the better—and also of course if one can a little one’s self. Except for that—you and me doing our best—I like you to see me just as I am. Yes, I like it—and I don’t exaggerate. Shouldn’t one, at the start, show the worst—so that anything after that may be better? It wouldn’t make any real difference—it won’t make any, anything that may happen won’t—to any one. Therefore I feel myself, this way, with you, just as I am; and—if you do in the least care to know—it quite positively bears me up.”

She put it as to his caring to know, because his manner seemed to give her all her chance, and the impression was there for her to take. It was strange and deep for her, this impression, and she did accordingly take it straight home. It showed him—showed him in spite of himself—as allowing, somewhere far within, things comparatively remote, things in fact quite, as she would have said, outside, delicately to weigh with him; showed him as interested on her behalf in other questions beside the question of what was the matter with her. She accepted such an interest as regular in the highest type of scientific mind—his own *being* the highest, magnificently—because otherwise obviously it wouldn’t be there; but she could at the same time take it as a direct source of light upon herself, even though that might present her a little as pretending to equal him. Wanting to know more about a patient than how a patient was constructed or deranged couldn’t be, even on the part of the greatest doctors, anything, but some form or other of the desire to let the patient down easily. When that was the case the reason, in turn, could only be, too manifestly, pity; and when pity held up its telltale face like a head on a pike, in a French revolution, bobbing before a window, what was that inference but that the patient was bad? He might say what he would now—she would always have seen the head at the window; and in fact from this moment she only wanted him to say what he would. He might say it too with the greater ease to himself as there wasn’t one of her divinations that—*as* her own—he would in any way put himself out for. Finally, if he was making her talk she was talking, and what it could at any rate come to for him was that she wasn’t afraid. If he wanted to do the dearest thing in the world for her he would show her he believed she wasn’t; which undertaking of hers—not to have misled him—was what she counted at the moment as her presumptuous little hint to him that she was as good as himself. It put forward the bold idea that he could really *be* misled; and there actually passed between them for some seconds a sign, a sign of the eyes only, that they knew together where they were. This made, in their brown old temple of truth, its momentary flicker; then what followed it was that he had her, all the same, in his pocket; and the whole thing wound up for that consummation with his kind dim smile. Such kindness was wonderful with such dimness; but brightness—that even of sharp steel—was of course for the other side of the business, and it would all come in for her to one tune or another. “Do you mean,” he asked, “that you’ve no relations at all?—not a parent, not a sister, not even a cousin nor an aunt?”

She shook her head as with the easy habit of an interviewed heroine or a freak of nature at a show. “Nobody whatever”—but the last thing she had come for was to be dreary about it. “I’m a survivor—a survivor of a general wreck. You see,” she added, “how that’s to be taken into account—that every one else has gone. When I was ten years old there were, with my father and my mother, six of us. I’m all that’s left. But they died,” she went on, to be fair all round, “of different things. Still, there it is. And, as I told you before, I’m American. Not that I mean that makes me worse. However, you’ll probably know what it makes me.”

“Yes”—he even showed amusement for it. “I know perfectly what it makes you. It makes you, to begin with, a capital case.”

She sighed, though gratefully, as if again before the social scene. “Ah there you are!”

“Oh no; there ‘we’ aren’t at all! There I am only—but as much as you like. I’ve no end of American friends: there they are, if you please, and it’s a fact that you couldn’t very well be in a better place than in their company. It puts you with plenty of others—and that isn’t pure solitude.” Then he pursued: “I’m sure you’ve an excellent spirit; but don’t try to bear more things than you need.” Which after an instant he further explained. “Hard things have come to you in youth, but you mustn’t think life will be for you all hard things. You’ve the right to be happy. You must make up your mind to it. You must accept any form in which happiness may come.”

“Oh I’ll accept any whatever!” she almost gaily returned. “And it seems to me, for that matter, that I’m

accepting a new one every day. Now *this!"* she smiled.

"This is very well so far as it goes. You can depend on me," the great man said, "for unlimited interest. But I'm only, after all, one element in fifty. We must gather in plenty of others. Don't mind who knows. Knows, I mean, that you and I are friends."

"Ah you do want to see some one!" she broke out. "You want to get at some one who cares for me." With which, however, as he simply met this spontaneity in a manner to show that he had often had it from young persons of her race, and that he was familiar even with the possibilities of *their* familiarity, she felt her freedom rendered vain by his silence, and she immediately tried to think of the most reasonable thing she could say. This would be, precisely, on the subject of that freedom, which she now quickly spoke of as complete. "That's of course by itself a great boon; so please don't think I don't know it. I can do exactly what I like—anything in all the wide world. I haven't a creature to ask—there's not a finger to stop me. I can shake about till I'm black and blue. That perhaps isn't *all* joy; but lots of people, I know, would like to try it." He had appeared about to put a question, but then had let her go on, which she promptly did, for she understood him the next moment as having thus taken it from her that her means were as great as might be. She had simply given it to him so, and this was all that would ever pass between them on the odious head. Yet she couldn't help also knowing that an important effect, for his judgement, or at least for his amusement—which was his feeling, since, marvellously, he did have feeling—was produced by it. All her little pieces had now then fallen together for him like the morsels of coloured glass that used to make combinations, under the hand, in the depths of one of the polygonal peepshows[ai] of childhood. "So that if it's a question of my doing anything under the sun that will help—!"

"You'll do anything under the sun? Good." He took that beautifully, ever so pleasantly, for what it was worth; but time was needed—the minutes or so were needed on the spot—to deal even provisionally with the substantive question. It was convenient, in its degree, that there was nothing she wouldn't do; but it seemed also highly and agreeably vague that she should have to do anything.They thus appeared to be taking her, together, for the moment, and almost for sociability, as prepared to proceed to gratuitous extremities; the upshot of which was in turn that after much interrogation, auscultation, exploration, much noting of his own sequences and neglecting of hers, had duly kept up the vagueness, they might have struck themselves, or may at least strike us, as coming back from an undeterred but useless voyage to the North Pole. Milly was ready, under orders, for the North Pole; which fact was doubtless what made a blinding anticlimax of her friend's actual abstention from orders. "No," she heard him again distinctly repeat it, "I don't want you for the present to do anything at all; anything, that is, but obey a small prescription or two that will be made clear to you, and let me within a few days come to see you at home."

It was at first heavenly. "Then you'll see Mrs. Stringham." But she didn't mind a bit now.

"Well, I shan't be afraid of Mrs. Stringham." And he said it once more as she asked once more: "Absolutely not; I 'send' you nowhere. England's all right—anywhere that's pleasant, convenient, decent, will be all right. You say you can do exactly as you like. Oblige me therefore by being so good as to do it. There's only one thing: you ought of course, now, as soon as I've seen you again, to get out of London."[14]

Milly thought. "May I then go back to the Continent?"

"By all means back to the Continent. Do go back to the Continent."

"Then how will you keep seeing me? But perhaps," she quickly added, "you won't want to keep seeing me."

He had it all ready; he had really everything all ready. "I shall follow you up; though if you mean that I don't want you to keep seeing *me*—"

"Well?" she asked.

It was only just here that he struck her the least bit as stumbling. "Well, see all you can. That's what it comes to. Worry about nothing. You have at least no worries. It's a great rare chance."

She had got up, for she had had from him both that he would send her something and would advise her promptly of the date of his coming to her, by which she was virtually dismissed. Yet for herself one or two things kept her. "May I come back to England too?"

"Rather! Whenever you like. But always, when you do come, immediately let me know."

"Ah," said Milly, "it won't be a great going to and fro."

"Then if you'll stay with us so much the better."

It touched her, the way he controlled his impatience of her; and the fact itself affected her as so precious

that she yielded to the wish to get more from it. “So you don’t think I’m out of my mind?”

“Perhaps that is,” he smiled, “all that’s the matter.”

She looked at him longer. “No, that’s too good. Shall I at any rate suffer?”

“Not a bit.”

“And yet then live?”

“My dear young lady,” said her distinguished friend, “isn’t to ‘live’ exactly what I’m trying to persuade you to take the trouble to do?”

—IV—

She had gone out with these last words so in her ears that when once she was well away—back this time in the great square alone—it was as if some instant application of them had opened out there before her. It was positively, that effect, an excitement that carried her on; she went forward into space under the sense of an impulse received—an impulse simple and direct, easy above all to act upon. She was borne up for the hour, and now she knew why she had wanted to come by herself. No one in the world could have sufficiently entered into her state; no tie would have been close enough to enable a companion to walk beside her without some disparity. She literally felt, in this first flush, that her only company must be the human race at large, present all round her, but inspiringly impersonal, and that her only field must be, then and there, the grey immensity of London. Grey immensity had somehow of a sudden become her element; grey immensity was what her distinguished friend had, for the moment, furnished her world with and what the question of “living,” as he put it to her, living by option, by volition, inevitably took on for its immediate face. She went straight before her, without weakness, altogether with strength; and still as she went she was more glad to be alone, for nobody—not Kate Croy, not Susan Shepherd either—would have wished to rush with her as she rushed. She had asked him at the last whether, being on foot, she might go home so, or elsewhere, and he had replied as if almost amused again at her extravagance: “You’re active, luckily, by nature—it’s beautiful: therefore rejoice in it. Be active, without folly—for you’re not foolish: be as active as you can and as you like.” That had been in fact the final push, as well as the touch that most made a mixture of her consciousness—a strange mixture that tasted at one and the same time of what she had lost and what had been given her. It was wonderful to her, while she took her random course, that these quantities felt so equal; she had been treated—hadn’t she?—as if it were in her power to live; and yet one wasn’t treated so—was one?—unless it had come up, quite as much, that one might die. The beauty of the bloom had gone from the small old sense of safety—that was distinct: she had left it behind her there for ever. But the beauty of the idea of a great adventure, a big dim experiment or struggle in which she might more responsibly than ever before take a hand, had been offered her instead. It was as if she had had to pluck off her breast, to throw away, some friendly ornament, a familiar flower, a little old jewel, that was part of her daily dress; and to take up and shoulder as a substitute some queer defensive weapon, a musket, a spear, a battle-axe—conducive possibly in a higher degree to a striking appearance, but demanding all the effort of the military posture.

She felt this instrument, for that matter, already on her back, so that she proceeded now in very truth after the fashion of a soldier on a march—proceeded as if, for her initiation, the first charge had been sounded. She passed along unknown streets, over dusty littery ways, between long rows of fronts not enhanced by the August light; she felt good for miles and only wanted to get lost; there were moments at corners, where she stopped and chose her direction, in which she quite lived up to his injunction to rejoice that she was active. It was like a new pleasure to have so new a reason; she would affirm without delay her option, her volition; taking this personal possession of what surrounded her was a fair affirmation to start with; and she really didn’t care if she made it at the cost of alarms for Susie. Susie would wonder in due course “whatever,” as she said at the hotel, had become of her; yet this would be nothing either, probably, to wonderments still in store. Wonderments in truth, Milly felt, even now attended her steps: it was quite as if she saw in people’s eyes the reflexion of her appearance and pace. She found herself moving at times in regions visibly not haunted by odd-looking girls from New York, duskily draped, sable-plumed, all but incongruously shod and gazing about them with extravagance; she might, from the curiosity she clearly excited in by-ways, in side-streets peopled with grimy children and costermongers’ carts,[aj] which she hoped were slums, literally have had her musket on her shoulder, have announced herself as freshly on the war-path. But for the fear of overdoing the character she would here and there have begun conversation, have asked her way; in spite of the fact that, as this would help the requirements of adventure, her way was exactly what she wanted not to know. The difficulty was that she at last accidentally found it; she had come out, she presently saw, at the Regent’s Park, round which on two or three occasions with Kate Croy her public chariot had solemnly rolled. But she went into it further

now; this was the real thing; the real thing was to be quite away from the pompous roads, well within the centre and on the stretches of shabby grass. Here were benches and smutty sheep; here were idle lads at games of ball, with their cries mild in the thick air; here were wanderers anxious and tired like herself; here doubtless were hundreds of others just in the same box. Their box, their great common anxiety, what was it, in this grim breathing-space, but the practical question of life? They could live if they would; that is, like herself, they had been told so: she saw them all about her, on seats, digesting the information, recognising it again as something in a slightly different shape familiar enough, the blessed old truth that they would live if they could. All she thus shared with them made her wish to sit in their company; which she so far did that she looked for a bench that was empty, eschewing a still emptier chair that she saw hard by and for which she would have paid, with superiority, a fee.

The last scrap of superiority had soon enough left her, if only because she before long knew herself far more tired than she had proposed. This and the charm, after a fashion, of the situation in itself made her linger and rest; there was an accepted spell in the sense that nobody in the world knew where she was. It was the first time in her life that this had happened; somebody, everybody appeared to have known before, at every instant of it, where she was; so that she was now suddenly able to put it to herself that that hadn't been a life. This present kind of thing therefore might be—which was where precisely her distinguished friend seemed to be wishing her to come out. He wished her also, it was true, not to make, as she was perhaps doing now, too much of her isolation; at the same time, however, as he clearly desired to deny her no decent source of interest. He was interested—she arrived at that—in her appealing to as many sources as possible; and it fairly filtered into her, as she sat and sat, that he was essentially propping her up. Had she been doing it herself she would have called it bolstering—the bolstering that was simply for the weak; and she thought and thought as she put together the proofs that it was as one of the weak he was treating her. It was of course as one of the weak that she had gone to him—but oh with how sneaking a hope that he might pronounce her, as to all indispensables, a veritable young lioness! What indeed she was really confronted with was the consciousness that he hadn't after all pronounced her anything: she nursed herself into the sense that he had beautifully got out of it. Did he think, however, she wondered, that he could keep out of it to the end?—though as she weighed the question she yet felt it a little unjust. Milly weighed, in this extraordinary hour, questions numerous and strange; but she had happily, before she moved, worked round to a simplification. Stranger than anything for instance was the effect of its rolling over her that, when one considered it, he might perhaps have "got out" by one door but to come in with a beautiful beneficent dishonesty by another. It kept her more intensely motionless there that what he might fundamentally be "up to" was some disguised intention of standing by her as a friend. Wasn't that what women always said they wanted to do when they deprecated the addresses of gentlemen they couldn't more intimately go on with? It was what they, no doubt, sincerely fancied they could make of men of whom they couldn't make husbands. And she didn't even reason that it was by a similar law the expedient of doctors in general for the invalids of whom they couldn't make patients: she was somehow so sufficiently aware that her doctor was—however fatuous it might sound—exceptionally moved. This was the damning little fact—if she could talk of damnation: that she could believe herself to have caught him in the act of irrelevantly liking her. She hadn't gone to him to be liked, she had gone to him to be judged; and he was quite a great enough man to be in the habit, as a rule, of observing the difference. She could like *him,* as she distinctly did—that was another matter; all the more that her doing so was now, so obviously for herself, compatible with judgement. Yet it would have been all portentously mixed had not, as we say, a final and merciful wave, chilling rather, but washing clear, come to her assistance.

It came of a sudden when all other thought was spent. She had been asking herself why, if her case was grave—and she knew what she meant by that—he should have talked to her at all about what she might with futility "do"; or why on the other hand, if it were light, he should attach an importance to the office of friendship. She had him, with her little lonely acuteness—as acuteness went during the dog-days in the Regent's Park—in a cleft stick: she either mattered, and then she was ill; or she didn't matter, and then she was well enough. Now he was "acting," as they said at home, as if she did matter—until he should prove the contrary. It was too evident that a person at his high pressure must keep his inconsistencies, which were probably his highest amusements, only for the very greatest occasions. Her prevision, in fine, of just where she should catch him furnished the light of that judgement in which we describe her as daring to indulge. And the judgement it was that made her sensation simple. He *had* distinguished her—that was the chill. He hadn't known—how could he?—that she was devilishly subtle, subtle exactly in the manner of the suspected, the suspicious, the condemned. He in fact confessed to it, in his way, as to an interest in her combinations, her funny race, her funny losses, her funny gains, her funny freedom, and, no doubt, above all, her funny manners—funny, like those of Americans at their best, without being vulgar, legitimating amiability and helping to pass it off. In his appreciation of these redundancies he dressed out for her the compassion he so signally permitted himself to waste; but its operation for herself was as directly divesting, denuding, exposing. It reduced her to her ultimate state, which was that of a poor girl—with her rent to pay for example—staring before her in a great city. Milly had her rent to pay, her rent for her future; everything else but how to meet it fell away from her in pieces, in tatters. This was the sensation the great man had doubtless not purposed.

Well, she must go home, like the poor girl, and see. There might after all be ways; the poor girl too would be thinking. It came back for that matter perhaps to views already presented. She looked about her again, on her feet, at her scattered melancholy comrades—some of them so melancholy as to be down on their stomachs in the grass, turned away, ignoring, burrowing; she saw once more, with them, those two faces of the question between which there was so little to choose for inspiration. It was perhaps superficially more striking that one could live if one would; but it was more appealing, insinuating, irresistible in short, that one would live if one could.

She found after this, for the day or two, more amusement than she had ventured to count on in the fact, if it were not a mere fancy, of deceiving Susie; and she presently felt that what made the difference was the mere fancy—as this was one—of a countermove to her great man. His taking on himself—should he do so—to get at her companion made her suddenly, she held, irresponsible, made any notion of her own all right for her; though indeed at the very moment she invited herself to enjoy this impunity she became aware of new matter for surprise, or at least for speculation. Her idea would rather have been that Mrs. Stringham would have looked at her hard—her sketch of the grounds of her independent long excursion showing, she could feel, as almost cynically superficial. Yet the dear woman so failed, in the event, to avail herself of any right of criticism that it was sensibly tempting to wonder for an hour if Kate Croy had been playing perfectly fair. Hadn't she possibly, from motives of the highest benevolence, promptings of the finest anxiety, just given poor Susie what she would have called the straight tip? It must immediately be mentioned, however, that, quite apart from a remembrance of the distinctness of Kate's promise, Milly, the next thing, found her explanation in a truth that had the merit of being general. If Susie at this crisis suspiciously spared her, it was really that Susie was always suspiciously sparing her—yet occasionally too with portentous and exceptional mercies. The girl was conscious of how she dropped at times into inscrutable impenetrable deferences—attitudes that, thought without at all intending it, made a difference for familiarity, for the ease of intimacy. It was as if she recalled herself to manners, to the law of court-etiquette—which last note above all helped our young woman to a just appreciation. It was definite for her, even if not quite solid, that to treat her as a princess was a positive need of her companion's mind; wherefore she couldn't help it if this lady had her transcendent view of the way the class in question were treated. Susan had read history, had read Gibbon and Froude and Saint-Simon;[15] she had high lights as to the special allowances made for the class, and, since she saw them, when young, as effete and overtutored, inevitably ironic and infinitely refined, one must take it for amusing if she inclined to an indulgence verily Byzantine.[ak] If one could only be Byzantine!—wasn't that what she insidiously led one on to sigh? Milly tried to oblige her—for it really placed Susan herself so handsomely to be Byzantine now. The great ladies of that race—it would be somewhere in Gibbon—were apparently not questioned about their mysteries. But oh poor Milly and hers! Susan at all events proved scarce more inquisitive than if she had been a mosaic at Ravenna. Susan was a porcelain monument to the odd moral that consideration might, like cynicism, have abysses. Besides, the Puritan finally disencumbered—! What starved generations wasn't Mrs. Stringham, in fancy, going to make up for?

Kate Croy came straight to the hotel—came that evening shortly before dinner; specifically and publicly moreover, in a hansomthat, driven apparently very fast, pulled up beneath their windows almost with the clatter of an accident, a "smash." Milly, alone, as happened, in the great garnished void of their sitting-room, where, a little, really, like a caged Byzantine, she had been pacing through the queer long-drawn almost sinister delay of night, an effect she yet liked—Milly, at the sound, one of the French windows standing open, passed out to the balcony that overhung, with pretensions, the general entrance, and so was in time for the look that Kate, alighting, paying her cabman, happened to send up to the front. The visitor moreover had a shilling back to wait for, during which Milly, from the balcony, looked down at her, and a mute exchange, but with smiles and nods, took place between them on what had occurred in the morning. It was what Kate had called for, and the tone was thus almost by accident determined for Milly before her friend came up. What was also, however, determined for her was, again, yet irrepressibly again, that the image presented to her, the splendid young woman who looked so particularly handsome in impatience, with the fine freedom of her signal, was the peculiar property of somebody else's vision, that this fine freedom in short was the fine freedom she showed Mr. Densher. Just so was how she looked to him, and just so was how Milly was held by her—held as by the strange sense of seeing through that distant person's eyes. It lasted, as usual, the strange sense, but fifty seconds; yet in so lasting it produced an effect. It produced in fact more than one, and we take them in their order. The first was that it struck our young woman as absurd to say that a girl's looking so to a man could possibly be without connexions; and the second was that by the time Kate had got into the room Milly was in mental possession of the main connexion it must have for herself.

She produced this commodity on the spot—produced it in straight response to Kate's frank "Well, what?" The enquiry bore of course, with Kate's eagerness, on the issue of the morning's scene, the great man's latest wisdom, and it doubtless affected Milly a little as the cheerful demand for news is apt to affect troubled spirits when news is not, in one of the neater forms, prepared for delivery. She couldn't have said what it was exactly that on the instant determined her; the nearest description of it would perhaps have been as the more vivid impression of all her friend took for granted. The contrast between this free quantity and the maze of

possibilities through which, for hours, she had herself been picking her way, put on, in short, for the moment, a grossness that even friendly forms scarce lightened: it helped forward in fact the revelation to herself that she absolutely had nothing to tell. Besides which, certainly, there was something else—an influence at the particular juncture still more obscure. Kate had lost, on the way upstairs, the look—*the* look—that made her young hostess so subtly think and one of the signs of which was that she never kept it for many moments at once; yet she stood there, none the less, so in her bloom and in her strength, so completely again the "handsome girl" beyond all others, the "handsome girl" for whom Milly had at first gratefully taken her, that to meet her now with the note of the plaintive would amount somehow to a surrender, to a confession. *She* would never in her life be ill; the greatest doctor would keep her, at the worst, the fewest minutes; and it was as if she had asked just *with* all this practical impeccability for all that was most mortal in her friend. These things, for Milly, inwardly danced their dance; but the vibration produced and the dust kicked up had lasted less than our account of them. Almost before she knew it she was answering, and answering beautifully, with no consciousness of fraud, only as with a sudden flare of the famous "will-power" she had heard about, read about, and which was what her medical adviser had mainly thrown her back on. "Oh it's all right. He's lovely."

Kate was splendid, and it would have been clear for Milly now, had the further presumption been needed, that she had said no word to Mrs. Stringham. "You mean you've been absurd?"

"Absurd." It was a simple word to say, but the consequence of it, for our young woman, was that she felt it, as soon as spoken, to have done something for her safety.

And Kate really hung on her lips. "There's nothing at all the matter?"

"Nothing to worry about. I shall need a little watching, but I shan't have to do anything dreadful, or even in the least inconvenient. I can do in fact as I like." It was wonderful for Milly how just to put it so made all its pieces fall at present quite properly into their places.

Yet even before the full effect came Kate had seized, kissed, blessed her. "My love, you're too sweet! It's too dear! But it's as I was sure." Then she grasped the full beauty. "You can do as you like?"

"Quite. Isn't it charming?"

"Ah but catch you," Kate triumphed with gaiety, "not doing—And what *shall* you do?"

"For the moment simply enjoy it. Enjoy"—Milly was completely luminous—"having got out of my scrape."

"Learning, you mean, so easily, that you *are* well?"

It was as if Kate had but too conveniently put the words into her mouth. "Learning, I mean, so easily, that I *am* well."

"Only no one's of course well enough to stay in London now. He can't," Kate went on, "want this of you."

"Mercy no—I'm to knock about. I'm to go to places."

"But not beastly 'climates'—Engadines, Rivieras, boredoms?"

"No; just, as I say, where I prefer. I'm to go in for pleasure."

"Oh the duck!"—Kate, with her own shades of familiarity, abounded. "But what kind of pleasure?"

"The highest," Milly smiled.

Her friend met it as nobly. "Which is the highest?"

"Well, it's just our chance to find out. You must help me."

"What have I wanted to do but help you," Kate asked, "from the moment I first laid eyes on you?" Yet with this too Kate had her wonder. "I like your talking, though, about that. What help, with your luck all round, do you need?"

—V—

Milly indeed at last couldn't say; so that she had really for the time brought it along to the point so oddly marked for her by her visitor's arrival, the truth that she was enviably strong. She carried this out, from that evening, for each hour still left her, and the more easily perhaps that the hours were now narrowly numbered. All she actually waited for was Sir Luke Strett's promised visit; as to her proceeding on which, however, her

mind was quite made up. Since he wanted to get at Susie he should have the freest access, and then perhaps he would see how he liked it. What was between *them* they might settle as between them, and any pressure it should lift from her own spirit they were at liberty to convert to their use. If the dear man wished to fire Susan Shepherd with a still higher ideal, he would only after all, at the worst, have Susan on his hands. If devotion, in a word, was what it would come up for the interested pair to organise, she was herself ready to consume it as the dressed and served dish. He had talked to her of her "appetite," her account of which, she felt, must have been vague. But for devotion, she could now see, this appetite would be of the best. Gross, greedy, ravenous—these were doubtless the proper names for her: she was at all events resigned in advance to the machinations of sympathy. The day that followed her lonely excursion was to be the last but two or three of their stay in London; and the evening of that day practically ranked for them as, in the matter of outside relations, the last of all. People were by this time quite scattered, and many of those who had so liberally manifested in calls, in cards, in evident sincerity about visits, later on, over the land, had positively passed in music out of sight; whether as members, these latter, more especially, of Mrs. Lowder's immediate circle or as members of Lord Mark's—our friends being by this time able to make the distinction. The general pitch had thus decidedly dropped, and the occasions still to be dealt with were special and few. One of these, for Milly, announced itself as the doctor's call already mentioned, as to which she had now had a note from him: the single other, of importance, was their appointed leave-taking—for the shortest separation—in respect to Mrs. Lowder and Kate. The aunt and the niece were to dine with them alone, intimately and easily—as easily as should be consistent with the question of their afterwards going on together to some absurdly belated party, at which they had had it from Aunt Maud that they would do well to show. Sir Luke was to make his appearance on the morrow of this, and in respect to that complication Milly had already her plan.

The night was at all events hot and stale, and it was late enough by the time the four ladies had been gathered in, for their small session, at the hotel, where the windows were still open to the high balconies and the flames of the candles, behind the pink shades—disposed as for the vigil of watchers—were motionless in the air in which the season lay dead. What was presently settled among them was that Milly, who betrayed on this occasion a preference more marked than usual, shouldn't hold herself obliged to climb that evening the social stair, however it might stretch to meet her, and that, Mrs. Lowder and Mrs. Stringham facing the ordeal together, Kate Croy should remain with her and await their return. It was a pleasure to Milly, ever, to send Susan Shepherd forth; she saw her go with complacency, liked, as it were, to put people off with her, and noted with satisfaction, when she so moved to the carriage, the further denudation—a markedly ebbing tide—of her little benevolent back. If it wasn't quite Aunt Maud's ideal, moreover, to take out the new American girl's funny friend instead of the new American girl herself, nothing could better indicate the range of that lady's merit than the spirit in which—as at the present hour for instance—she made the best of the minor advantage. And she did this with a broad cheerful absence of illusion; she did it—confessing even as much to poor Susie—because, frankly, she *was* good-natured. When Mrs. Stringham observed that her own light was too abjectly borrowed and that it was as a link alone, fortunately not missing, that she was valued, Aunt Maud concurred to the extent of the remark: "Well, my dear, you're better than nothing." To-night furthermore it came up for Milly that Aunt Maud had something particular in mind. Mrs. Stringham, before adjourning with her, had gone off for some shawl or other accessory, and Kate, as if a little impatient for their withdrawal, had wandered out to the balcony, where she hovered for the time unseen, though with scarce more to look at than the dim London stars and the cruder glow, up the street, on a corner, of a small public-house in front of which a fagged cab-horse was thrown into relief. Mrs. Lowder made use of the moment: Milly felt as soon as she had spoken that what she was doing was somehow for use.

"Dear Susan tells me that you saw in America Mr. Densher—whom I've never till now, as you may have noticed, asked you about. But do you mind at last, in connexion with him, doing something for me?" She had lowered her fine voice to a depth, though speaking with all her rich glibness; and Milly, after a small sharpness of surprise, was already guessing the sense of her appeal. "Will you name him, in any way you like, to *her*"—and Aunt Maud gave a nod at the window; "so that you may perhaps find out whether he's back?"

Ever so many things, for Milly, fell into line at this; it was a wonder, she afterwards thought, that she could be conscious of so many at once. She smiled hard, however, for them all. "But I don't know that it's important to me to 'find out.' " The array of things was further swollen, however, even as she said this, by its striking her as too much to say. She therefore tried as quickly to say less. "Except you mean of course that it's important to you." She fancied Aunt Maud was looking at her almost as hard as she was herself smiling, and that gave her another impulse. "You know I never have yet named him to her; so that if I should break out now—"

"Well?"—Mrs. Lowder waited.

"Why she may wonder what I've been making a mystery of. She hasn't mentioned him, you know," Milly went on, "herself."

"No"—her friend a little heavily weighed it—"she wouldn't. So it's she, you see then, who has made the mystery."

Yes, Milly but wanted to see; only there was so much. “There has been of course no particular reason.” Yet that indeed was neither here nor there. “Do you think,” she asked, “he is back?”

“It will be about his time, I gather, and rather a comfort to me definitely to know.”

“Then can’t you ask her yourself?”

“Ah we never speak of him!”

It helped Milly for the moment to the convenience of a puzzled pause. “Do you mean he’s an acquaintance of whom you disapprove for her?”

Aunt Maud, as well, just hung fire. “I disapprove of her for the poor young man. She doesn’t care for him.”

“And *he* cares so much—?”

“Too much, too much. And my fear is,” said Mrs. Lowder, “that he privately besets her. She keeps it to herself, but I don’t want her worried. Neither, in truth,” she both generously and confidentially concluded, “do I want *him.”*

Milly showed all her own effort to meet the case. “But what can I do?”

“You can find out where they are. If I myself try,” Mrs. Lowder explained, “I shall appear to treat them as if I supposed them deceiving me.”

“And you don’t. You don’t,” Milly mused for her, “suppose them deceiving you.”

“Well,” said Aunt Maud, whose fine onyx eyes failed to blink even though Milly’s questions might have been taken as drawing her rather further than she had originally meant to go—“well, Kate’s thoroughly aware of my views for her, and that I take her being with me at present, in the way she is with me, if you know what I mean, for a loyal assent to them. Therefore as my views don’t happen to provide a place at all for Mr. Densher, much, in a manner, as I like him”—therefore in short she had been prompted to this step, though she completed her sense, but sketchily, with the rattle of her large fan.

It assisted them for the moment perhaps, however, that Milly was able to pick out of her sense what might serve as the clearest part of it. “You do like him then?”

“Oh dear yes. Don’t you?”

Milly waited, for the question was somehow as the sudden point of something sharp on a nerve that winced. She just caught her breath, but she had ground for joy afterwards, she felt, in not really having failed to choose with quickness sufficient, out of fifteen possible answers, the one that would best serve her. She was then almost proud, as well, that she had cheerfully smiled. “I did—three times—in New York.” So came and went, in these simple words, the speech that was to figure for her later on, that night, as the one she had ever uttered that cost her most. She was to lie awake for the gladness of not having taken any line so really inferior as the denial of a happy impression.

For Mrs. Lowder also moreover her simple words were the right ones; they were at any rate, that lady’s laugh showed, in the natural note of the racy. “You dear American thing! But people may be very good and yet not good for what one wants.”

“Yes,” the girl assented, “even I suppose when what one wants is something very good.”

“Oh my child, it would take too long just now to tell you all I want! I want everything at once and together —and ever so much for you too, you know. But you’ve seen us,” Aunt Maud continued; “you’ll have made out.”

“Ah,” said Milly, “I *don’t* make out;” for again—it came that way in rushes—she felt an obscurity in things. “Why, if our friend here doesn’t like him—”

“Should I conceive her interested in keeping things from me?” Mrs. Lowder did justice to the question. “My dear, how can you ask? Put yourself in her place. She meets me, but on her terms. Proud young women are proud young women. And proud old ones are—well, what I am. Fond of you as we both are, you can help us.”

Milly tried to be inspired. “Does it come back then to my asking her straight?”

At this, however, finally, Aunt Maud threw her up. “Oh if you’ve so many reasons not—!”

“I’ve not so many,” Milly smiled—“but I’ve one. If I break out so suddenly on my knowing him, what will she make of my not having spoken before?”

Mrs. Lowder looked blank at it. “Why should you care what she makes? You may have only been decently

discreet."

"Ah I *have* been," the girl made haste to say.

"Besides," her friend went on, "I suggested to you, through Susan, your line."

"Yes, that reason's a reason for *me."*

"And for *me,"* Mrs. Lowder insisted. "She's not therefore so stupid as not to do justice to grounds so marked. You can tell her perfectly that I had asked you to say nothing."

"And may I tell her that you've asked me now to speak?"

Mrs. Lowder might well have thought, yet, oddly, this pulled her up. "You can't do it without—?"

Milly was almost ashamed to be raising so many difficulties. "I'll do what I can if you'll kindly tell me one thing more." She faltered a little—it was so prying; but she brought it out. "Will he have been writing to her?"

"It's exactly, my dear, what I should like to know!" Mrs. Lowder was at last impatient. "Push in for yourself and I dare say she'll tell you."

Even now, all the same, Milly had not quite fallen back. "It will be pushing in," she continued to smile, "for you." She allowed her companion, however, no time to take this up. "The point will be that if he has been writing she may have answered."

"But what point, you subtle thing, is that?"

"It isn't subtle, it seems to me, but quite simple," Milly said, "that if she has answered she has very possibly spoken of me."

"Very certainly indeed. But what difference will it make?"

The girl had a moment, at this, of thinking it natural Mrs. Lowder herself should so fail of subtlety. "It will make the difference that he'll have written her in reply that he knows me. And that, in turn," our young woman explained, "will give an oddity to my own silence."

"How so, if she's perfectly aware of having given you no opening? The only oddity," Aunt Maud lucidly professed, "is for yourself. It's in *her* not having spoken."

"Ah there we are!" said Milly.

And she had uttered it, evidently, in a tone that struck her friend. "Then it *has* troubled you?"

But the enquiry had only to be made to bring the rare colour with fine inconsequence to her face. "Not really the least little bit!" And, quickly feeling the need to abound in this sense, she was on the point, to cut short, of declaring that she cared, after all, no scrap how much she obliged. Only she felt at this instant too the intervention of still other things. Mrs. Lowder was in the first place already beforehand, already affected as by the sudden vision of her having herself pushed too far. Milly could never judge from her face of her uppermost motive—it was so little, in its hard smooth sheen, that kind of human countenance. She looked hard when she spoke fair; the only thing was that when she spoke hard she didn't likewise look soft. Something, none the less, had arisen in her now—a full appreciable tide, entering by the rupture of some bar. She announced that if what she had asked was to prove in the least a bore her young friend was not to dream of it; making her young friend at the same time, by the change in her tone, dream on the spot more profusely. She spoke, with a belated light, Milly could apprehend—she could always apprehend—from pity; and the result of that perception, for the girl, was singular: it proved to her as quickly that Kate, keeping her secret, had been straight with her. From Kate distinctly then, as to why she was to be pitied, Aunt Maud knew nothing, and was thereby simply putting in evidence the fine side of her own character. This fine side was that she could almost at any hour, by a kindled preference or a diverted energy, glow for another interest than her own. She exclaimed as well, at this moment, that Milly must have been thinking round the case much more than she had supposed; and this remark could affect the girl as quickly and as sharply as any other form of the charge of weakness. It was what every one, if she didn't look out, would soon be saying—"There's something the matter with you!" What one was therefore one's self concerned immediately to establish was that there was nothing at all. "I shall like to help you; I shall like, so far as that goes, to help Kate herself," she made such haste as she could to declare; her eyes wandering meanwhile across the width of the room to that dusk of the balcony in which their companion perhaps a little unaccountably lingered. She suggested hereby her impatience to begin; she almost overtly wondered at the length of the opportunity this friend was giving them —referring it, however, so far as words went, to the other friend and breaking off with an amused: "How tremendously Susie must be beautifying!"

It only marked Aunt Maud, none the less, as too preoccupied for her allusion. The onyx eyes were fixed

upon her with a polished pressure that must signify some enriched benevolence. “Let it go, my dear. We shall after all soon enough see.”

“If he *has* come back we shall certainly see,” Milly after a moment replied; “for he’ll probably feel that he can’t quite civilly not come to see me. Then *there,”* she remarked, “we shall be. It wouldn’t then, you see, come through Kate at all—it would come through him. Except,” she wound up with a smile, “that he won’t find me.”

She had the most extraordinary sense of interesting her guest, in spite of herself, more than she wanted; it was as if her doom so floated her on that she couldn’t stop—by very much the same trick it had played her with her doctor. “Shall you run away from him?”

She neglected the question, wanting only now to get off. “Then,” she went on, “you’ll deal with Kate directly.”

“Shall you run away from *her?”* Mrs. Lowder profoundly enquired, while they became aware of Susie’s return through the room, opening out behind them, in which they had dined.

This affected Milly as giving her but an instant; and suddenly, with it, everything she felt in the connexion rose to her lips for a question that even as she put it, she knew she was failing to keep colourless. “Is it your own belief that he is with her?”

Aunt Maud took it in—took in, that is, everything of the tone that she just wanted her not to; and the result for some seconds was but to make their eyes meet in silence. Mrs. Stringham had rejoined them and was asking if Kate had gone—an enquiry at once answered by this young lady’s reappearance. They saw her again in the open window, where, looking at them, she had paused—producing thus on Aunt Maud’s part almost too impressive a “Hush!” Mrs. Lowder indeed without loss of time smothered any danger in a sweeping retreat with Susie; but Milly’s words to her, just uttered, about dealing with her niece directly, struck our young woman as already recoiling on herself. Directness, however evaded, would be, fully, for *her;* nothing in fact would ever have been for her so direct as the evasion. Kate had remained in the window, very handsome and upright, the outer dark framing in a highly favourable way her summery simplicities and lightnesses of dress. Milly had, given the relation of space, no real fear she had heard their talk; only she hovered there as with conscious eyes and some added advantage. Then indeed, with small delay, her friend sufficiently saw. The conscious eyes, the added advantage were but those she had now always at command—those proper to the person Milly knew as known to Merton Densher. It was for several seconds again as if the *total* of her identity had been that of the person known to him—a determination having for result another sharpness of its own. Kate had positively but to be there just as she was to tell her he had come back. It seemed to pass between them in fine without a word that he was in London, that he was perhaps only round the corner; and surely therefore no dealing of Milly’s with her would yet have been so direct.

—VI—

It was doubtless because this queer form of directness had in itself, for the hour, seemed so sufficient that Milly was afterwards aware of having really, all the while—during the strange indescribable session before the return of their companions—done nothing to intensify it. If she was most aware only afterwards, under the long and discurtained ordeal of the morrow’s dawn, that was because she had really, till their evening’s end came, ceased after a little to miss anything from their ostensible comfort. What was behind showed but in gleams and glimpses; what was in front never at all confessed to not holding the stage. Three minutes hadn’t passed before Milly quite knew she should have done nothing Aunt Maud had just asked her. She knew it moreover by much the same light that had acted for her with that lady and with Sir Luke Strett. It pressed upon her then and there that she was still in a current determined, through her indifference, timidity, bravery, generosity—she scarce could say which—by others; that not she but the current acted, and that somebody else always was the keeper of the lock or the dam. Kate for example had but to open the flood-gate: the current moved in its mass—the current, as it had been, of her doing as Kate wanted. What, somehow, in the most extraordinary way in the world, *had* Kate wanted but to be, of a sudden, more interesting than she had ever been? Milly, for their evening then, quite held her breath with the appreciation of it. If she hadn’t been sure her companion would have had nothing, from her moments with Mrs. Lowder, to go by, she would almost have seen the admirable creature “cutting in” to anticipate a danger. This fantasy indeed, while they sat together, dropped after a little; even if only because other fantasies multiplied and clustered, making fairly, for our young woman, the buoyant medium in which her friend talked and moved. They sat together, I say, but Kate moved as much as she talked; she figured there, restless and charming, just perhaps a shade perfunctory, repeatedly quitting her place, taking slowly, to and fro, in the trailing folds of her light dress, the

length of the room—almost avowedly performing for the pleasure of her hostess.

Mrs. Lowder had said to Milly at Matcham that she and her niece, as allies, could practically conquer the world; but though it was a speech about which there had even then been a vague grand glamour the girl read into it at present more of an approach to a meaning. Kate, for that matter, by herself, could conquer anything, and she, Milly Theale, was probably concerned with the "world" only as the small scrap of it that most impinged on her and that was therefore first to be dealt with. On this basis of being dealt with she would doubtless herself do her share of the conquering: she would have something to supply, Kate something to take—each of them thus, to that tune, something for squaring with Aunt Maud's ideal. This in short was what it came to now—that the occasion, in the quiet late lamplight, had the quality of a rough rehearsal of the possible big drama. Milly knew herself dealt with—handsomely, completely: she surrendered to the knowledge, for so it was, she felt, that she supplied her helpful force. And what Kate had to take Kate took as freely and to all appearance as gratefully; accepting afresh, with each of her long, slow walks, the relation between them so established and consecrating her companion's surrender simply by the interest she gave it. The interest to Milly herself we naturally mean; the interest to Kate Milly felt as probably inferior. It easily and largely came for their present talk, for the quick flight of the hour before the breach of the spell—it all came, when considered, from the circumstance, not in the least abnormal, that the handsome girl was in extraordinary "form." Milly remembered her having said that she was at her best late at night; remembered it by its having, with its fine assurance, made her wonder when *she* was at her best and how happy people must be who had such a fixed time. She had no time at all; she was never at her best—unless indeed it were exactly, as now, in listening, watching, admiring, collapsing. If Kate moreover, quite mercilessly, had never been so good, the beauty and the marvel of it was that she had never really been so frank: being a person of such a calibre, as Milly would have said, that, even while "dealing" with you and thereby, as it were, picking her steps, she could let herself go, could, in irony, in confidence, in extravagance, tell you things she had never told before. That was the impression—that she was telling things, and quite conceivably for her own relief as well; almost as if the errors of vision, the mistakes of proportion, the residuary innocence of spirit still to be remedied on the part of her auditor, had their moments of proving too much for her nerves. She went at them just now, these sources of irritation, with an amused energy that it would have been open to Milly to regard as cynical and that was nevertheless called for—as to this the other was distinct—by the way that in certain connexions the American mind broke down. It seemed at least—the American mind as sitting there thrilled and dazzled in Milly—not to understand English society without a separate confrontation with *all* the cases. It couldn't proceed by—there was some technical term she lacked until Milly suggested both analogy and induction, and then, differently, instinct, none of which were right: it had to be led up and introduced to each aspect of the monster, enabled to walk all round it, whether for the consequent exaggerated ecstasy or for the still more (as appeared to this critic) disproportionate shock. It might, the monster, Kate conceded, loom large for those born amid forms less developed and therefore no doubt less amusing; it might on some sides be a strange and dreadful monster, calculated to devour the unwary, to abase the proud, to scandalise the good; but if one had to live with it one must, not to be for ever sitting up, learn how: which was virtually in short to-night what the handsome girl showed herself as teaching.

She gave away publicly, in this process, Lancaster Gate and everything it contained; she gave away, hand over hand, Milly's thrill continued to note, Aunt Maud and Aunt Maud's glories and Aunt Maud's complacencies; she gave herself away most of all, and it was naturally what most contributed to her candour. She didn't speak to her friend once more, in Aunt Maud's strain, of how they could scale the skies; she spoke, by her bright perverse preference on this occasion, of the need, in the first place, of being neither stupid nor vulgar. It might have been a lesson, for our young American, in the art of seeing things as they were—a lesson so various and so sustained that the pupil had, as we have shown, but receptively to gape. The odd thing furthermore was that it could serve its purpose while explicitly disavowing every personal bias. It wasn't that she disliked Aunt Maud, who was everything she had on other occasions declared; but the dear woman, ineffaceably stamped by inscrutable nature and a dreadful art, wasn't—how could she be?—what she wasn't. She wasn't any one. She wasn't anything. She wasn't anywhere. Milly mustn't think it—one couldn't, as a good friend, let her. Those hours at Matcham were *inespérées*, [al] were pure manna from heaven; or if not wholly that perhaps, with humbugging old Lord Mark as a backer, were vain as a ground for hopes and calculations. Lord Mark was very well, but he wasn't *the* cleverest creature in England, and even if he had been he still wouldn't have been the most obliging. He weighed it out in ounces, and indeed each of the pair was really waiting for what the other would put down.

"She has put down *you*," said Milly, attached to the subject still; "and I think what you mean is that, on the counter, she still keeps hold of you."

"Lest"—Kate took it up—"he should suddenly grab me and run? Oh as he isn't ready to run he's much less ready, naturally, to grab. I *am*— you're so far right as that—on the counter, when I'm not in the shop-window; in and out of which I'm thus conveniently, commercially whisked: the essence, all of it, of my position, and the price, as properly of my aunt's protection." Lord Mark was substantially what she had begun with as soon

as they were alone; the impression was even yet with Milly of her having sounded his name, having imposed it, as a topic, in direct oppositionto the other name that Mrs. Lowder had left in the air and that all her own look, as we have seen, kept there at first for her companion. The immediate strange effect had been that of her consciously needing, as it were, an *alibi*—which, successfully, she so found. She had worked it to the end, ridden it to and fro across the course marked for Milly by Aunt Maud, and now she had quite, so to speak, broken it in. “The bore is that if she wants him so much—wants him, heaven forgive her! for *me*—he has put us all out, since your arrival, by wanting somebody else. I don’t mean somebody else than you.”

Milly threw off the charm sufficiently to shake her head. “Then I haven’t made out who it is. If I’m any part of his alternative he had better stop where he is.”

“Truly, truly?—always, always?”

Milly tried to insist with an equal gaiety. “Would you like me to swear?”

Kate appeared for a moment—though that was doubtless but gaiety too—to think. “Haven’t we been swearing enough?”

“You have perhaps, but I haven‘t, and I ought to give you the equivalent. At any rate there it is. ‘Truly, truly’ as you say-‘always, always.’ So I’m not in the way.”

“Thanks,” said Kate—“but that doesn’t help me.”

“Oh it’s as simplifying for him that I speak of it.”

The difficulty really is that he’s a person with so many ideas that it’s particularly hard to simplify for him. That’s exactly of course what Aunt Maud has been trying. He won’t,” Kate firmly continued, “make up his mind about me”.

“Well,” Milly smiled, “give him time.”

Her friend met it in perfection. “One’s doing that—one is. But one remains all the same but one of his ideas.”

“There’s no harm in that,” Milly returned, “if you come out in the end as the best of them. What’s a man,” she pursued, “especially an ambitious one, without a variety of ideas?”

“No doubt. The more the merrier.” And Kate looked at her grandly. “One can but hope to come out, and do nothing to prevent it.”

All of which made for the impression, fantastic or not, of the *alibi.* The splendour, the grandeur were for Milly the bold ironic spirit behind it, so interesting too in itself. What, further, was not less interesting was the fact, as our young woman noted it, that Kate confined her point to the difficulties, so far as *she* was concerned, raised only by Lord Mark. She referred now to none that her own taste might present; which circumstance again played its little part. She was doing what she liked in respect to another person, but she was in no way committed to the other person, and her moreover talking of Lord Mark as not young and not true were only the signs of her clear self-consciousness, were all in the line of her slightly hard but scarce the less graceful extravagance. She didn’t wish to show too much her consent to be arranged for, but that was a different thing from not wishing sufficiently to give it. There was something on it all, as well, that Milly still found occasion to say. “If your aunt has been, as you tell me, put out by me, I feel she has remained remarkably kind.”

“Oh but she has—whatever might have happened in that respect—plenty of use for you! You put her in, my dear, more than you put her out. You don’t half see it, but she has clutched your petticoat. You can do anything—you can do, I mean, lots that we can’t. You’re an outsider, independent and standing by yourself; you’re not hideously relative to tiers and tiers of others.” And Kate, facing in that direction, went further and further; wound up, while Milly gaped, with extraordinary words. “We’re of no use to you—it’s decent to tell you. You’d be of use to us, but that’s a different matter. My honest advice to you would be—” she went indeed all lengths—“to drop us while you can. It would be funny if you didn’t soon see how awfully better you can do. We’ve not really done for you the least thing worth speaking of—nothing you mightn’t easily have had in some other way. Therefore you’re under no obligation. You won’t want us next year; we shall only continue to want you. But that’s no reason for you, and you mustn’t pay too dreadfully for poor Mrs. Stringham’s having let you in. She has the best conscience in the world; she’s enchanted with what she has done; but you shouldn’t take your people from *her.* It has been quite awful to see you do it.”

Milly tried to be amused, so as not—it was too absurd—to be fairly frightened. Strange enough indeed—if not natural enough—that, late at night thus, in a mere mercenary house, with Susie away, a want of confidence should possess her. She recalled, with all the rest of it, the next day, piecing things together in the dawn, that she had felt herself alone with a creature who paced like a panther. That was a violent image, but it made her a little less ashamed of having been scared. For all her scare, none the less, she had now the sense

to find words. “And yet without Susie I shouldn’t have had you.”

It had been at this point, however, that Kate flickered highest. “Oh you may very well loathe me yet!”[16]

Really at last, thus, it had been too much; as, with her own least feeble flare, after a wondering watch, Milly had shown. She hadn’t cared; she had too much wanted to know; and, though a small solemnity of remonstrance, a sombre strain, had broken into her tone, it was to figure as her nearest approach to serving Mrs. Lowder. “Why do you say such things to me?”

This unexpectedly had acted, by a sudden turn of Kate’s attitude, as a happy speech. She had risen as she spoke, and Kate had stopped before her, shining at her instantly with a softer brightness. Poor Milly hereby enjoyed one of her views of how people, wincing oddly, were often touched by her. “Because you’re a dove.” With which she felt herself ever so delicately, so considerately, embraced; not with familiarity or as a liberty taken, but almost ceremonially and in the manner of an *accolade*; partly as if, though a dove who could perch on a finger, one were also a princess with whom forms were to be observed. It even came to her, through the touch of her companion’s lips, that this form, this cool pressure, fairly sealed the sense of what Kate had just said. It was moreover, for the girl, like an inspiration: she found herself accepting as the right one, while she caught her breath with relief, the name so given her. She met it on the instant as she would have met revealed truth; it lighted up the strange dusk in which she lately had walked. *That* was what was the matter with her. She was a dove. Oh *wasn’t* she?—it echoed within her as she became aware of the sound, outside, of the return of their friends. There was, the next thing, little enough doubt about it after Aunt Maud had been two minutes in the room. She had come up, Mrs. Lowder, with Susan—which she needn’t have done, at that hour, instead of letting Kate come down to her; so that Milly could be quite sure it was to catch hold, in some way, of the loose end they had left. Well, the way she did catch was simply to make the point that it didn’t now in the least matter. She had mounted the stairs for this, and she had her moment again with her younger hostess while Kate, on the spot, as the latter at the time noted, gave Susan Shepherd unwonted opportunities. Kate was in other words, as Aunt Maud engaged her friend, listening with the handsomest response to Mrs. Stringham’s impression of the scene they had just quitted. It was in the tone of the fondest indulgence—almost, really, that of dove cooing to dove—that Mrs. Lowder expressed to Milly the hope that it had all gone beautifully. Her “all” had an ample benevolence; it soothed and simplified; she spoke as if it were the two young women, not she and her comrade, who had been facing the town together. But Milly’s answer had prepared itself while Aunt Maud was on the stair; she had felt in a rush all the reasons that would make it the most dovelike; and she gave it, while she was about it, as earnest, as candid. “I don’t *think*, dear lady, he’s here.”

It gave her straightway the measure of the success she could have as a dove: that was recorded in the long look of deep criticism, a look without a word, that Mrs. Lowder poured forth. And the word, presently, bettered it still. “Oh you exquisite thing!” The luscious innuendo of it, almost startling, lingered in the room, after the visitors had gone, like an oversweet fragrance. But left alone with Mrs. Stringham Milly continued to breathe it: she studied again the dovelike and so set her companion to mere rich reporting that she averted all enquiry into her own case.

That, with the new day, was once more her law—though she saw before her, of course, as something of a complication, her need, each time, to decide. She should have to be clear as to how a dove *would* act. She settled it, she thought, well enough this morning by quite readopting her plan in respect to Sir Luke Strett. That, she was pleased to reflect, had originally been pitched in the key of a merely iridescent drab; and although Mrs. Stringham, after breakfast, began by staring at it as if it had been a priceless Persian carpet suddenly unrolled at her feet, she had no scruple, at the end of five minutes, in leaving her to make the best of it. “Sir Luke Strett comes, by appointment, to see me at eleven, but I’m going out on purpose. He’s to be told, please, deceptively, that I’m at home, and you, as my representative, when he comes up, are to see him instead. He’ll like that, this time, better. So do be nice to him.” It had taken, naturally, more explanation, and the mention, above all, of the fact that the visitor was the greatest of doctors; yet when once the key had been offered Susie slipped it on her bunch, and her young friend could again feel her lovely imagination operate. It operated in truth very much as Mrs. Lowder‘s, at the last, had done the night before: it made the air heavy once more with the extravagance of assent. It might, afresh, almost have frightened our young woman to see how people rushed to meet her: *had* she then so little time to live that the road must always be spared her? It was as if they were helping her to take it out on the spot. Susie—she couldn’t deny, and didn’t pretend to—might, of a truth, on her side, have treated such news as a flash merely lurid; as to which, to do Susie justice, the pain of it was all there. But, none the less, the margin always allowed her young friend was all there as well; and the proposal now made her—what was it in short but Byzantine? The vision of Milly’s perception of the propriety of the matter had, at any rate, quickly engulfed, so far as her attitude was concerned, any surprise and any shock; so that she only desired, the next thing, perfectly to possess the facts. Milly could easily speak, on this, as if there were only one: she made nothing of such another as that she had felt herself menaced. The great fact, in fine, was that she *knew* him to desire just now, more than anything else, to meet, quite apart, some one interested in her. Who therefore so interested as her faithful Susan? The only other

circumstance that, by the time she had quitted her friend, she had treated as worth mentioning was the circumstance of her having at first intended to keep quiet. She had originally best seen herself as sweetly secretive. As to that she had changed, and her present request was the result. She didn't say why she had changed, but she trusted her faithful Susan. Their visitor would trust her not less, and she herself would adore their visitor. Moreover he wouldn't—the girl felt sure—tell her anything dreadful. The worst would be that he was in love and that he needed a confidant to work it. And now she was going to the National Gallery.

—VII—

The idea of the National Gallery had been with her from the moment of her hearing from Sir Luke Strett about his hour of coming. It had been in her mind as a place so meagrely visited, as one of the places that had seemed at home one of the attractions of Europe and one of its highest aids to culture, but that—the old story—the typical frivolous always ended by sacrificing to vulgar pleasures. She had had perfectly, at those whimsical moments on the Brünig, the half-shamed sense of turning her back on such opportunities for real improvement as had figured to her, from of old, in connexion with the continental tour, under the general head of "pictures and things"; and at last she knew for what she had done so. The plea had been explicit—she had done so for life as opposed to learning; the upshot of which had been that life was now beautifully provided for. In spite of those few dips and dashes into the many-coloured stream of history for which of late Kate Croy had helped her to find time, there were possible great chances she had neglected, possible great moments she should, save for to-day, have all but missed. She might still, she had felt, overtake one or two of them among the Titians and the Turners; she had been honestly nursing the hour, and, once she was in the benignant halls, her faith knew itself justified. It was the air she wanted and the world she would now exclusively choose; the quiet chambers, nobly overwhelming, rich but slightly veiled, opened out round her and made her presently say "If I could lose myself *here!"* There were people, people in plenty, but, admirably, no personal question. It was immense, outside, the personal question; but she had blissfully left it outside, and the nearest it came, for a quarter of an hour, to glimmering again into view was when she watched for a little one of the more earnest of the lady-copyists. Two or three in particular, spectacled, aproned, absorbed, engaged her sympathy to an absurd extent, seemed to show her for the time the right way to live. She should have been a lady-copyist—it met so the case. The case was the case of escape, of living under water, of being at once impersonal and firm. There it was before one—one had only to stick and stick.

Milly yielded to this charm till she was almost ashamed; she watched the lady-copyists till she found herself wondering what would be thought by others of a young woman, of adequate aspect, who should appear to regard them as the pride of the place. She would have liked to talk to them, to get, as it figured to her, into their lives, and was deterred but by the fact that she didn't quite see herself as purchasing imitations and yet feared she might excite the expectation of purchase. She really knew before long that what held her was the mere refuge, that something within her was after all too weak for the Turners and Titians. They joined hands about her in a circle too vast, though a circle that a year before she would only have desired to trace. They were truly for the larger, not for the smaller life, the life of which the actual pitch, for example, was an interest, the interest of compassion, in misguided efforts. She marked absurdly her little stations, blinking, in her shrinkage of curiosity, at the glorious walls, yet keeping an eye on vistas and approaches, so that she shouldn't be flagrantly caught. The vistas and approaches drew her in this way from room to room, and she had been through many parts of the show, as she supposed, when she sat down to rest. There were chairs in scant clusters, places from which one could gaze. Milly indeed at present fixed her eyes more than elsewhere on the appearance, first, that she couldn't quite, after all, have accounted to an examiner for the order of her "schools," and then on that of her being more tired than she had meant, in spite of her having been so much less intelligent. They found, her eyes, it should be added, other occupation as well, which she let them freely follow: they rested largely, in her vagueness, on the vagueness of her visitors; they attached themselves in especial, with mixed results, to the surprising stream of her compatriots. She was struck with the circumstance that the great museum, early in August, was haunted with these pilgrims, as also with that of her knowing them from afar, marking them easily, each and all, and recognising not less promptly that they had ever new lights for her—new lights on their own darkness. She gave herself up at last, and it was a consummation like another: what she should have come to the National Gallery for today would be to watch the copyists and reckon the Baedekers. That perhaps was the moral of a menaced state of health—that one would sit in public places and count the Americans. It passed the time in a manner; but it seemed already the second line of defence, and this notwithstanding the pattern, so unmistakeable, of her country-folk. They were cut out as by scissors, coloured, labelled, mounted; but their relation to her failed to act—they somehow did nothing for her. Partly, no doubt, they didn't so much as notice or know her, didn't even recognise their community of collapse with her, the sign on her, as she sat there, that for her too Europe was "tough." It came to her idly thus—for her humour could still play—that she didn't seem then the same success with them as

with the inhabitants of London, who had taken her up on scarce more of an acquaintance. She could wonder if they would be different should she go back with this glamour attached; and she could also wonder, if it came to that, whether she should ever go back. Her friends straggled past, at any rate, in all the vividness of their absent criticism, and she had even at last the sense of taking a mean advantage.

There was a finer instant, however, at which three ladies, clearly a mother and daughters, had paused before her under compulsion of a comment apparently just uttered by one of them and referring to some object on the other side of the room. Milly had her back to the object, but her face very much to her young compatriot, the one who had spoken and in whose look she perceived a certain gloom of recognition. Recognition, for that matter, sat confessedly in her own eyes: she *knew* the three, generically, as easily as a school-boy with a crib in his lap would know the answer in class; she felt, like the school-boy, guilty enough—questioned, as honour went, as to her right so to possess, to dispossess, people who hadn't consciously provoked her. She would have been able to say where they lived, and also how, had the place and the way been but amenable to the positive; she bent tenderly, in imagination, over marital, paternal Mr. Whatever-he-was, at home, eternally named, with all the honours and placidities, but eternally unseen and existing only as some one who could be financially heard from. The mother, the puffed and composed whiteness of whose hair had no relation to her apparent age, showed a countenance almost chemically clean and dry; her companions wore an air of vague resentment humanised by fatigue; and the three were equally adorned with short cloaks of coloured cloth surmounted by little tartan hoods. The tartans were doubtless conceivable as different, but the cloaks, curiously, only thinkable as one. "Handsome? Well, if you choose to say so." It was the mother who had spoken, who herself added, after a pause during which Milly took the reference as to a picture: "In the English style." The three, pair of eyes had converged, and their possessors had for an instant rested, with the effect of a drop of the subject, on this last characterisation—with that, too, of a gloom not less mute in one of the daughters than murmured in the other. Milly's heart went out to them while they turned their backs; she said to herself that they ought to have known her, that there was something between them they might have beautifully put together. But she had lost them also—they were cold; they left her in her weak wonder as to what they had been looking at. The "handsome" disposed her to turn—all the more that the "English style" would be the English school, which she liked; only she saw, before moving, by the array on the side facing her, that she was in fact among small Dutch pictures. The action of this was again appreciable—the dim surmise that it wouldn't then be by a picture that the spring in the three ladies had been pressed. It was at all events time she should go, and she turned as she got on her feet. She had had behind her one of the entrances and various visitors who had come in while she sat, visitors single and in pairs—by one of the former of whom she felt her eyes suddenly held.

This was a gentleman in the middle of the place, a gentleman who had removed his hat and was for a moment, while he glanced, absently, as she could see, at the top tier of the collection, tapping his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief. The occupation held him long enough to give Milly time to take for granted-and a few seconds sufficed—that his face was the object just observed by her friends. This could only have been because she concurred in their tribute, even qualified; and indeed "the English style" of the gentleman—perhaps by instant contrast to the American—was what had had the arresting power. This arresting power, at the same time—and that was the marvel—had already sharpened almost to pain, for in the very act of judging the bared head with detachment she felt herself shaken by a knowledge of it. It was Merton Densher's own, and he was standing there, standing long enough unconscious for her to fix him and then hesitate. These successions were swift, so that she could still ask herself in freedom if she had best let him see her. She could still reply to this that she shouldn't like him to catch her in the effort to prevent it; and she might further have decided that he was too preoccupied to see anything had not a perception intervened that surpassed the first in violence. She was unable to think afterwards how long she had looked at him before knowing herself as otherwise looked at; all she was coherently to put together was that she had had a second recognition without his having noticed her. The source of this latter shock was nobody less than Kate Croy—Kate Croy who was suddenly also in the line of vision and whose eyes met her eyes at their next movement. Kate was but two yards off—Mr. Densher wasn't alone. Kate's face specifically said so, for after a stare as blank at first as Milly's it broke into a far smile. That was what, wonderfully—in addition to the marvel of their meeting—passed from her for Milly; the instant reduction to easy terms of the fact of their being there, the two young women, together. It was perhaps only afterwards that the girl fully felt the connexion between this touch and her already established conviction that Kate was a prodigious person; yet on the spot she none the less, in a degree, knew herself handled and again, as she had been the night before, dealt with—absolutely even dealt with for her greater pleasure. A minute in fine hadn't elapsed before Kate had somehow made her provisionally take everything as natural. The provisional was just the charm—acquiring that character from one moment to the other; it represented happily so much that Kate would explain on the very first chance. This left moreover—and that was the greatest wonder—all due margin for amusement at the way things happened, the monstrous oddity of their turning up in such a place on the very heels of their having separated without allusion to it. The handsome girl was thus literally in control of the scene by the time Merton Densher was ready to exclaim with a high flush or a vivid blush—one didn't distinguish the embarrassment from the

joy—“Why Miss Theale: fancy!” and “Why Miss Theale: what luck!”

Miss Theale had meanwhile the sense that for him too, on Kate’s part, something wonderful and unspoken was determinant; and this although, distinctly, his companion had no more looked at him with a hint than he had looked at her with a question. He had looked and was looking only at Milly herself, ever so pleasantly and considerately—she scarce knew what to call it; but without prejudice to her consciousness, all the same, that women got out of predicaments better than men. The predicament of course wasn’t definite nor phraseable—and the way they let all phrasing pass was presently to recur to our young woman as a characteristic triumph of the civilised state; but she took it for granted, insistently, with a small private flare of passion, because the one thing she could think of to do for him was to show him how she eased him off. She would really, tired and nervous, have been much disconcerted if the opportunity in question hadn’t saved her. It was what had saved her most, what had made her, after the first few seconds, almost as brave for Kate as Kate was for her, had made her only ask herself what their friend would like of her. That he was at the end of three minutes, without the least complicated reference, so smoothly “their” friend was just the effect of their all being sublimely civilised. The flash in which he saw this was, for Milly, fairly inspiring—to that degree in fact that she was even now, on such a plane, yearning to be supreme. It took, no doubt, a big dose of inspiration to treat as not funny—or at least as not unpleasant—the anomaly, for Kate, that *she* knew their gentleman, and for herself, that Kate was spending the morning with him; but everything continued to make for this after Milly had tasted of her draught. She was to wonder in subsequent reflexion what in the world they had actually said, since they had made such a success of what they didn’t say; the sweetness of the draught for the time, at any rate, was to feel success assured. What depended on this for Mr. Densher was all obscurity to her, and she perhaps but invented the image of his need as a short cut to accommodation. Whatever the facts, their perfect manners, all round, saw them through. The finest part of Milly’s own inspiration, it may further be mentioned, was the quick perception that what would be of most service was, so to speak, her own native wood-note. She had long been conscious with shame for her thin blood, or at least for her poor economy, of her unused margin as an American girl—closely indeed as in English air the text might appear to cover the page. She still had reserves of spontaneity, if not of comicality; so that all this cash in hand could now find employment. She became as spontaneous as possible and as American as it might conveniently appeal to Mr. Densher, after his travels, to find her. She said things in the air, and yet flattered herself that she struck him as saying them not in the tone of agitation but in the tone of New York. In the tone of New York agitation was beautifully discounted, and she had now a sufficient view of how much it might accordingly help her.

The help was fairly rendered before they left the place; when her friends presently accepted her invitation to adjourn with her to luncheon at her hotel it was in Fifth Avenue that the meal might have waited. Kate had never been there so straight, but Milly was at present taking her; and if Mr. Densher had been he had at least never had to come so fast. She proposed it as the natural thing—proposed it as the American girl; and she saw herself quickly justified by the pace at which she was followed. The beauty of the case was that to do it all she had only to appear to take Kate’s hint. This had said in its fine first smile “Oh yes, our look’s queer—but give me time”; and the American girl could give time as nobody else could. What Milly thus gave she therefore made them take—even if, as they might surmise, it was rather more than they wanted. In the porch of the museum she expressed her preference for a four-wheeler; they would take their course in that guise precisely to multiply the minutes. She was more than ever justified by the positive charm that her spirit imparted even to their use of this conveyance; and she touched her highest point—that is certainly for herself—as she ushered her companions into the presence of Susie. Susie was there with luncheon as well as with her return in prospect; and nothing could now have filled her own consciousness more to the brim than to see this good friend take in how little she was abjectly anxious. The cup itself actually offered to this good friend might in truth well be startling, for it was composed beyond question of ingredients oddly mixed. She caught Susie fairly looking at her as if to know whether she had brought in guests to hear Sir Luke Strett’s report. Well, it was better her companion should have too much than too little to wonder about; she had come out “anyway,” as they said at home, for the interest of the thing; and interest truly sat in her eyes. Milly was none the less, at the sharpest crisis, a little sorry for her; she could of necessity extract from the odd scene so comparatively little of a soothing secret. She saw Mr. Densher suddenly popping up, but she saw nothing else that had happened. She saw in the same way her young friend indifferent to her young friend’s doom, and she lacked what would explain it. The only thing to keep her in patience was the way, after luncheon, Kate almost, as might be said, made up to her. This was actually perhaps as well what most kept Milly herself in patience. It had in fact for our young woman a positive beauty—was so marked as a deviation from the handsome girl’s previous courses. Susie had been a bore to the handsome girl, and the change was now suggestive. The two sat together, after they had risen from table, in the apartment in which they had lunched, making it thus easy for the other guest and his entertainer to sit in the room adjacent. This, for the latter personage, was the beauty; it was almost, on Kate’s part, like a prayer to be relieved. If she honestly liked better to be “thrown with” Susan Shepherd than with their other friend, why that said practically everything. It didn’t perhaps altogether say why she had gone out with him for the morning, but it said, as one thought, about as much as she could say to his face.

Little by little indeed, under the vividness of Kate's behaviour, the probabilities fell back into their order. Merton Densher was in love and Kate couldn't help it—could only be sorry and kind: wouldn't that, without wild flurries, cover everything? Milly at all events tried it as a cover, tried it hard, for the time; pulled it over her, in the front, the larger room, drew it up to her chin with energy. If it didn't, so treated, do everything for her, it did so much that she could herself supply the rest. She made that up by the interest of her great question, the question of whether, seeing him once more, with all that, as she called it to herself, had come and gone, her impression of him would be different from the impression received in New York. That had held her from the moment of their leaving the museum; it kept her company through their drive and during luncheon; and now that she was a quarter of an hour alone with him it became acute. She was to feel at this crisis that no clear, no common answer, no direct satisfaction on this point, was to reach her; she was to see her question itself simply go to pieces. She couldn't tell if he were different or not, and she didn't know nor care if *she* were: these things had ceased to matter in the light of the only thing she did know. This was that she liked him, as she put it to herself, as much as ever; and if that were to amount to liking a new person the amusement would be but the greater. She had thought him at first very quiet, in spite of his recovery from his original confusion; though even the shade of bewilderment, she yet perceived, had not been due to such vagueness on the subject of her reintensified identity as the probable sight, over there, of many thousands of her kind would sufficiently have justified. No, he was quiet, inevitably, for the first half of the time, because Milly's own lively line—the line of spontaneity—made everything else relative; and because too, so far as Kate was spontaneous, it was ever so finely in the air among them that the normal pitch must be kept. Afterwards, when they had got a little more used, as it were, to each other's separate felicity, he had begun to talk more, clearly bethinking himself at a given moment of what *his* natural lively line would be. It would be to take for granted she must wish to hear of the States, and to give her in its order everything he had seen and done there. He abounded, of a sudden—he almost insisted; he returned, after breaks, to the charge; and the effect was perhaps the more odd as he gave no clue whatever to what he had admired, as he went, or to what he hadn't. He simply drenched her with his sociable story—especially during the time they were away from the others. She had stopped then being American—all to let him be English; a permission of which he took, she could feel, both immense and unconscious advantage. She had really never cared less for the States than at this moment; but that had nothing to do with the matter. It would have been the occasion of her life to learn about them, for nothing could put him off, and he ventured on no reference to what had happened for herself. It might have been almost as if he had known that the greatest of all these adventures was her doing just what she did then.

It was at this point that she saw the smash of her great question complete, saw that all she had to do with was the sense of being there with him. And there was no chill for this in what she also presently saw—that, however he had begun, he was now acting from a particular desire, determined either by new facts or new fancies, to be like every one else, simplifyingly "kind" to her. He had caught on already as to manner—fallen into line with every one else; and if his spirits verily *had* gone up it might well be that he had thus felt himself lighting on the remedy for all awkwardness. Whatever he did or he didn't Milly knew she should still like him—there was no alternative to that; but her heart could none the less sink a little on feeling how much his view of her was destined to have in common with—as she now sighed over *it-the* view. She could have dreamed of his not having *the* view, of his having something or other, if need be quite viewless, of his own; but he might have what he could with least trouble, and *the* view wouldn't be after all a positive bar to her seeing him. The defect of it in general—if she might so ungraciously criticise—was that, by its sweet universality, it made relations rather prosaically a matter of course. It anticipated and superseded the—likewise sweet-operation of real affinities. It was this that was doubtless marked in her power to keep him now—this and her glassy lustre of attention to his pleasantness about the scenery in the Rockies. She was in truth a little measuring her success in detaining him by Kate's success in "standing" Susan. It wouldn't be, if she could help it, Mr. Densher who should first break down. Such at least was one of the forms of the girl's inward tension; but beneath even this deep reason was a motive still finer. What she had left at home on going out to give it a chance was meanwhile still, was more sharply and actively, there. What had been at the top of her mind about it and then been violently pushed down—this quantity was again working up. As soon as their friends should go Susie would break out, and what she would breakout upon wouldn't be—interested in that gentleman as she had more than once shown herself—the personal fact of Mr. Densher. Milly had found in her face at luncheon a feverish glitter, and it told what she was full of. She didn't care now for Mr. Densher's personal fact. Mr. Densher had risen before her only to find his proper place in her imagination already of a sudden occupied. His personal fact failed, so far as she was concerned, to *be* personal, and her companion noticed the failure. This could only mean that she was full to the brim of Sir Luke Strett and of what she had had from him. What *had* she had from him? It was indeed now working upward again that Milly would do well to know, though knowledge looked stiff in the light of Susie's glitter. It was therefore on the whole because Densher's young hostess was divided from it by so thin a partition that she continued to cling to the Rockies.

END OF VOLUME I

VOLUME II

BOOK SIXTH

—I—

"I say, you know, Kate—you *did* stay!" had been Merton Densher's punctual remark on their adventure after they had, as it were, got out of it; an observation which she not less promptly, on her side, let him see that she forgave in him only because he was a man. She had to recognise, with whatever disappointment, that it was doubtless the most helpful he could make in this character. The fact of the adventure was flagrant between them; they had looked at each other, on gaining the street, as people look who have just rounded together a dangerous corner, and there was therefore already enough unanimity sketched out to have lighted, for her companion, anything equivocal in her action. But the amount of light men *did* need!—Kate could have been eloquent at this moment about that. What, however, on his seeing more, struck him as most distinct in her was her sense that, reunited after his absence and having been now half the morning together, it behooved them to face without delay the question of handling their immediate future. That it would require some handling, that they should still have to deal, deal in a crafty manner, with difficulties and delays, was the great matter he had come back to, greater than any but the refreshed consciousness of their personal need of each other. This need had had twenty minutes, the afternoon before, to find out where it stood, and the time was fully accounted for by the charm of the demonstration. He had arrived at Euston at five, having wired her from Liverpool the moment he landed, and she had quickly decided to meet him at the station, whatever publicity might attend such an act. When he had praised her for it on alighting from his train she had answered frankly enough that such things should be taken at a jump. She didn't care to-day who saw her, and she profited by it for her joy. Tomorrow, inevitably, she should have time to think and then, as inevitably, would become a baser creature, a creature of alarms and precautions. It was none the less for to-morrow at an early hour that she had appointed their next meeting, keeping in mind for the present a particular obligation to show at Lancaster Gate by six o'clock. She had given, with imprecations, her reason—people to tea, eternally, and a promise to Aunt Maud; but she had been liberal enough on the spot and had suggested the National Gallery for the morning quite as with an idea that had ripened in expectancy. They might be seen there too, but nobody would know them; just as, for that matter, now, in the refreshment-room to which they had adjourned, they would incur the notice but, at the worst, of the unacquainted. They would "have something" there for the facility it would give. Thus had it already come up for them again that they had no place of convenience.

He found himself on English soil with all sorts of feelings, but he hadn't quite faced having to reckon with a certain ruefulness in regard to that subject as one of the strongest. He was aware later on that there were questions his impatience had shirked; whereby it actually rather smote him, for want of preparation and assurance, that he had nowhere to "take" his love. He had taken it thus, at Euston—and on Kate's own suggestion—into the place where people had beer and buns, and had ordered tea at a small table in the corner; which, no doubt, as they were lost in the crowd, did well enough for a stop-gap. It perhaps did as well as her simply driving with him to the door of his lodging, which had had to figure as the sole device of his own wit. That wit, the truth was, had broken down a little at the sharp prevision that once at his door they would have to hang back. She would have to stop there, wouldn't come in with him, couldn't possibly; and he shouldn't be able to ask her, would feel he couldn't without betraying a deficiency of what would be called, even at their advanced stage, respect for her: that again was all that was clear except the further fact that it was maddening. Compressed and concentrated, confined to a single sharp pang or two, but none the less in wait for him there on the Euston platform and lifting its head as that of a snake in the garden, was the disconcerting sense that "respect," in their game, seemed somehow—he scarce knew what to call it—a fifth wheel to the coach. It was properly an inside thing, not an outside, a thing to make love greater, not to make happiness less. They had met again for happiness, and he distinctly felt, during his most lucid moment or two, how he must keep watch on anything that really menaced that boon. If Kate had consented to drive away with him and alight at his house there would probably enough have occurred for them, at the foot of his steps, one of those strange instants between man and woman that blow upon the red spark, the spark of conflict, ever latent in the depths of passion. She would have shaken her head—oh sadly, divinely—on the question of coming in; and he, though doing all justice to her refusal, would have yet felt his eyes reach further into her own than a possible word at such a time could reach. This would have meant the suspicion, the dread of the shadow, of an adverse will. Lucky therefore in the actual case that the scant minutes took another turn and that by the half-hour she did in spite of everything contrive to spend with him Kate showed so well how she

could deal with things that maddened. She seemed to ask him, to beseech him, and all for his better comfort, to leave her, now and henceforth, to treat them in her own way.

She had still met it in naming so promptly, for their early convenience, one of the great museums; and indeed with such happy art that his fully seeing where she had placed him hadn't been till after he left her. His absence from her for so many weeks had had such an effect upon him that his demands, his desires had grown; and only the night before, as his ship steamed, beneath summer stars, in sight of the Irish coast, he had felt all the force of his particular necessity. He hadn't in other words at any point doubted he was on his way to say to her that really their mistake must end. Their mistake was to have believed that they *could* hold out—hold out, that is, not against Aunt Maud, but against an impatience that, prolonged and exasperated, made a man ill. He had known more than ever, on their separating in the court of the station, how ill a man, and even a woman, could feel from such a cause; but he struck himself as also knowing that he had already suffered Kate to begin finely to apply antidotes and remedies and subtle sedatives. It had a vulgar sound—as throughout, in love, the names of things, the verbal terms of intercourse, were, compared with love itself, horribly vulgar; but it was as if, after all, he might have come back to find himself "put off," though it would take him of course a day or two to see. His letters from the States had pleased whom it concerned, though not so much as he had meant they should; and he should be paid according to agreement and would now take up his money. It wasn't in truth very much to take up, so that he hadn't in the least come back flourishing a cheque-book; that new motive for bringing his mistress to terms he couldn't therefore pretend to produce. The ideal certainty would have been to be able to present a change of prospect as a warrant for the change of philosophy, and without it he should have to make shift but with the pretext of the lapse of time. The lapse of time—not so many weeks, after all, she might always of course say—couldn't at any rate have failed to do something for him; and that consideration it was that had just now tided him over, all the more that he had his vision of what it had done personally for Kate. This had come out for him with a splendour that almost scared him even in their small corner of the room at Euston—almost scared him because it just seemed to blaze at him that waiting was the game of dupes. Not yet had she been so the creature he had originally seen; not yet had he felt so soundly safely sure. It was all there for him, playing on his pride of possession as a hidden master in a great dim church might play on the grandest organ. His final sense was that a woman couldn't be like that and then ask of one the impossible.

She had been like that afresh on the morrow; and so for the hour they had been able to float in the mere joy of contact—such contact as their situation in pictured public halls permitted. This poor makeshift for closeness confessed itself in truth, by twenty small signs of unrest even on Kate's part, inadequate; so little could a decent interest in the interesting place presume to remind them of its claims. They had met there in order not to meet in the streets and not again, with an equal want of invention and of style, at a railway-station; not again, either, in Kensington Gardens, which, they could easily and tacitly agree, would have had too much of the taste of their old frustrations. The present taste, the taste that morning in the pictured halls, had been a variation; yet Densher had at the end of a quarter of an hour fully known what to conclude from it. This fairly consoled him for their awkwardness, as if he had been watching it affect her. She might be as nobly charming as she liked, and he had seen nothing to touch her in the States; she couldn't pretend that in such conditions as those she herself *believed* it enough to appease him. She couldn't pretend she believed he would believe it enough to render her a like service. It wasn't enough for that purpose—she as good as showed him it wasn't. That was what he could be glad, by demonstration, to have brought her to. He would have said to her had he put it crudely and on the spot: *"Now* am I to understand you that you consider this sort of thing can go on?" It would have been open to her, no doubt, to reply that to have him with her again, to have him all kept and treasured, so still, under her grasping hand, as she had held him in their yearning interval, was a sort of thing that he must allow her to have no quarrel about; but that would be a mere gesture of her grace, a mere sport of her subtlety. She knew as well as he what they wanted; in spite of which indeed he scarce could have said how beautifully he mightn't once more have named it and urged it if she hadn't, at a given moment, blurred, as it were, the accord. They had soon seated themselves for better talk, and so they had remained a while, intimate and superficial. The immediate things to say had been many, for they hadn't exhausted them at Euston. They drew upon them freely now, and Kate appeared quite to forget—which was prodigiously becoming to her—to look about for surprises. He was to try afterwards, and try in vain, to remember what speech or what silence of his own, what natural sign of the eyes or accidental touch of the hand, had precipitated for her, in the midst of this, a sudden different impulse. She had got up, with inconsequence, as if to break the charm, though he wasn't aware of what he had done at the moment to make the charm a danger. She had patched it up agreeably enough the next minute by some odd remark about some picture, to which he hadn't so much as replied; it being quite independently of this that he had himself exclaimed on the dreadful closeness of the rooms. He had observed that they must go out again to breathe; and it was as if their common consciousness, while they passed into another part, was that of persons who, infinitely engaged together, had been startled and were trying to look natural. It was probably while they were so occupied—as the young man subsequently reconceived—that they had stumbled upon his little New York friend. He thought of her for some reason as little, though she was of about Kate's height, to which, any

more than to any other felicity in his mistress, he had never applied the diminutive.

What was to be in the retrospect more distinct to him was the process by which he had become aware that Kate's acquaintance with her was greater than he had gathered. She had written of it in due course as a new and amusing one, and he had written back that he had met over there, and that he much liked, the young person; whereupon she had answered that he must find out about her at home. Kate, in the event, however, had not returned to that, and he had of course, with so many things to find out about, been otherwise taken up. Little Miss Theale's individual history was not stuff for his newspaper; besides which, moreover, he was seeing but too many little Miss Theales. They even went so far as to impose themselves as one of the groups of social phenomena that fell into the scheme of his public letters. For this group in especial perhaps—the irrepressible, the supereminent young persons—his best pen was ready. Thus it was that there could come back to him in London, an hour or two after their luncheon with the American pair, the sense of a situation for which Kate hadn't wholly prepared him. Possibly indeed as marked as this was his recovered perception that preparations, of more than one kind, had been exactly what, both yesterday and to-day, he felt her as having in hand. That appearance in fact, if he dwelt on it, so ministered to apprehension as to require some brushing away. He shook off the suspicion to some extent, on their separating first from their hostesses and then from each other, by the aid of a long and rather aimless walk. He was to go to the office later, but he had the next two or three hours, and he gave himself as a pretext that he had eaten much too much. After Kate had asked him to put her into a cab—which, as an announced, a resumed policy on her part, he found himself deprecating—he stood a while by a corner and looked vaguely forth at his London. There was always doubtless a moment for the absentee recaptured—*the* moment, that of the reflux of the first emotion—at which it was beyond disproof that one was back. His full parenthesis was closed, and he was once more but a sentence, of a sort, in the general text, the text that, from his momentary street-corner, showed as a great grey page of print that somehow managed to be crowded without being "fine." The grey, however, was more or less the blur of a point of view not yet quite seized again; and there would be colour enough to come out. He was back, flatly enough, but back to possibilities and prospects, and the ground he now somewhat sightlessly covered was the act of renewed possession.

He walked northward without a plan, without suspicion, quite in the direction his little New York friend, in her restless ramble, had taken a day or two before. He reached, like Milly, the Regent's Park; and though he moved further and faster he finally sat down, like Milly, from the force of thought. For him too in this position, be it added—and he might positively have occupied the same bench—various troubled fancies folded their wings. He had no more yet said what he really wanted than Kate herself had found time. She should hear enough of that in a couple of days. He had practically not pressed her as to what most concerned them; it had seemed so to concern them during these first hours but to hold each other, spiritually speaking, close. This at any rate was palpable, that there were at present more things rather than fewer between them. The explanation about the two ladies would be part of the lot, yet could wait with all the rest. They were not meanwhile certainly what most made him roam—the missing explanations weren't. That was what she had so often said before, and always with the effect of suddenly breaking off: "Now please call me a good cab." Their previous encounters, the times when they had reached in their stroll the south side of the park, had had a way of winding up with this special irrelevance. It was effectively what most divided them, for he would generally, but for her reasons, have been able to jump in with her. What did she think he wished to do to her?—it was a question he had had occasion to put. A small matter, however, doubtless—since, when it came to that, they didn't depend on cabs good or bad for the sense of union: its importance was less from the particular loss than as a kind of irritating mark of her expertness. This expertness, under providence, had been great from the first, so far as joining him was concerned; and he was critical only because it had been still greater, even from the first too, in respect to leaving him. He had put the question to her again that afternoon, on the repetition of her appeal-had asked her once more what she supposed he wished to do. He recalled, on his bench in the Regent's Park, the freedom of fancy, funny and pretty, with which she had answered; recalled the moment itself, while the usual hansom charged them, during which he felt himself, disappointed as he was, grimacing back at the superiority of her very "humour," in its added grace of gaiety, to the celebrated solemn American. Their fresh appointment had been at all events by that time made, and he should see what her choice in respect to it—a surprise as well as a relief—would do toward really simplifying. It meant either new help or new hindrance, though it took them at least out of the streets. And her naming this privilege had naturally made him ask if Mrs. Lowder knew of his return.

"Not from me," Kate had replied. "But I shall speak to her now." And she had argued, as with rather a quick fresh view, that it would now be quite easy. "We've behaved for months so properly that I've margin surely for my mention of you. You'll come to see *her,* and she'll leave you with me; she'll show her good nature, and her lack of betrayed fear, in that. With her, you know, you've never broken, quite the contrary, and she likes you as much as ever. We're leaving town; it will be the end; just now therefore it's nothing to ask. I'll ask to-night," Kate had wound up, "and if you'll leave it to me—my cleverness, I assure you, has grown infernal—I'll make it all right."

He had of course thus left it to her and he was wondering more about it now than he had wondered there in Brook Street. He repeated to himself that if it wasn't in the line of triumph it was in the line of muddle. This indeed, no doubt, was as a part of his wonder for still other questions. Kate had really got off without meeting his little challenge about the terms of their intercourse with her dear Milly. Her dear Milly, it was sensible, *was* somehow in the picture. Her dear Milly, popping up in his absence, occupied—he couldn't have said quite why he felt it—more of the foreground than one would have expected her in advance to find clear. She took up room, and it was almost as if room had been made for her. Kate had appeared to take for granted he would know why it had been made; but that was just the point. It was a foreground in which he himself, in which his connexion with Kate, scarce enjoyed a space to turn round. But Miss Theale was perhaps at the present juncture a possibility of the same sort as the softened, if not the squared, Aunt Maud. It might be true of her also that if she weren't a bore she'd be a convenience. It rolled over him of a sudden, after he had resumed his walk, that this might easily be what Kate had meant. The charming girl adored her—Densher had for himself made out that—and would protect, would lend a hand, to their interviews. These might take place, in other words, on her premises, which would remove them still better from the streets. *That* was an explanation which did hang together. It was impaired a little, of a truth, by this fact that their next encounter was rather markedly not to depend upon her. Yet this fact in turn would be accounted for by the need of more preliminaries. One of the things he conceivably should gain on Thursday at Lancaster Gate would be a further view of that propriety.

—II—

It was extraordinary enough that he should actually be finding himself, when Thursday arrived, none so wide of the mark. Kate hadn't come all the way to this for him, but she had come to a good deal by the end of a quarter of an hour. What she had begun with was her surprise at her appearing to have left him on Tuesday anything more to understand. The parts, as he now saw, under her hand, did fall more or less together, and it wasn't even as if she had spent the interval in twisting and fitting them. She was bright and handsome, not fagged and worn, with the general clearness; for it certainly stuck out enough that if the American ladies themselves weren't to be squared, which was absurd, they fairly imposed the necessity of trying Aunt Maud again. One couldn't say to them, kind as she had been to them: "We'll meet, please, whenever you'll let us, at your house; but we count on you to help us to keep it secret." They must in other terms inevitably speak to Aunt Maud—it would be of the last awkwardness to ask them not to: Kate had embraced all this in her choice of speaking first. What Kate embraced altogether was indeed wonderful today for Densher, though he perhaps struck himself rather as getting it out of her piece by piece than as receiving it in a steady light. He had always felt, however, that the more he asked of her the more he found her prepared, as he imaged it, to hand out. He had said to her more than once even before his absence: "You keep the key of the cupboard, and I foresee that when we're married you'll dole me out my sugar by lumps." She had replied that she rejoiced in his assumption that sugar would be his diet, and the domestic arrangement so prefigured might have seemed already to prevail. The supply from the cupboard at this hour was doubtless, of a truth, not altogether cloyingly sweet; but it met in a manner his immediate requirements. If her explanations at any rate prompted questions the questions no more exhausted them than they exhausted her patience. And they were naturally, of the series, the simpler; as for instance in his taking it from her that Miss Theale then could do nothing for them. He frankly brought out what he had ventured to think possible. "If we can't meet here and we've really exhausted the charms of the open air and the crowd, some such little raft in the wreck, some occasional opportunity like that of Tuesday, has been present to me these two days as better than nothing. But if our friends are so accountable to this house of course there's no more to be said. And it's one more nail, thank God, in the coffin of our odious delay." He was but too glad without more ado to point the moral. "Now I hope you see we can't work it anyhow."

If she laughed for this—and her spirits seemed really high—it was because of the opportunity that, at the hotel, he had most shown himself as enjoying. "Your idea's beautiful when one remembers that you hadn't a word except for Milly." But she was as beautifully good-humoured. "You might of course get used to her—you *will*. You're quite right—so long as they're with us or near us." And she put it, lucidly, that the dear things couldn't *help,* simply as charming friends, giving them a lift. "They'll speak to Aunt Maud, but they won't shut their doors to us: that would be another matter. A friend always helps—and she's a friend." She had left Mrs. Stringham by this time out of the question; she had reduced it to Milly. "Besides, she particularly likes us. She particularly likes you. I say, old boy, make something of that." He felt her dodging the ultimatum he had just made sharp, his definite reminder of how little, at the best, they could work it; but there were certain of his remarks—those mostly of the sharper penetration—that it had been quite her practice from the first not formally, not reverently to notice. She showed the effect of them in ways less trite. This was what happened now: he didn't think in truth that she wasn't really minding. She took him up, none the less, on a minor

question. “You say we can’t meet here, but you see it’s just what we do. What could be more lovely than this?”

It wasn’t to torment him—that again he didn’t believe; but he had to come to the house in some discomfort, so that he frowned a little at her calling it thus a luxury. Wasn’t there an element in it of coming back into bondage? The bondage might be veiled and varnished, but he knew in his bones how little the very highest privileges of Lancaster Gate could ever be a sign of their freedom. They were upstairs, in one of the smaller apartments of state, a room arranged as a boudoir, but visibly unused—it defied familiarity—and furnished in the ugliest of blues. He had immediately looked with interest at the closed doors, and Kate had met his interest with the assurance that it was all right, that Aunt Maud did them justice—so far, that was, as this particular time was concerned ; that they should be alone and have nothing to fear. But the fresh allusion to this that he had drawn from her acted on him now more directly, brought him closer still to the question. They *were* alone—it *was* all right: he took in anew the shut doors and the permitted privacy, the solid stillness of the great house. They connected themselves on the spot with something made doubly vivid in him by the whole present play of her charming strong will. What it amounted to was that he couldn’t have her—hanged if he could!—evasive. He couldn’t and he wouldn’t—wouldn’t have her inconvenient and elusive. He didn’t want her deeper than himself, fine as it might be as wit or as character; he wanted to keep her where their communications would be straight and easy and their intercourse independent. The effect of this was to make him say in a moment: “Will you take me just as I am?”

She turned a little pale for the tone of truth in it—which qualified to his sense delightfully the strength of her will; and the pleasure he found in this was not the less for her breaking out after an instant into a strain that stirred him more than any she had ever used with him. “Ah do let me try myself! I assure you I see my way—so don’t spoil it: wait for me and give me time. Dear man,” Kate said, “only believe in me, and it will be beautiful.”

He hadn’t come back to hear her talk of his believing in her as if he didn’t; but he had come back—and it all was upon him now—to seize her with a sudden intensity that her manner of pleading with him had made, as happily, appeared, irresistible. He laid strong hands upon her to say, almost in anger, “Do you love me, love me, love me?” and she closed her eyes as with the sense that he might strike her but that she could gratefully take it. Her surrender was her response, her response her surrender; and, though scarce hearing what she said, he so profited by these things that it could for the time be ever so intimately appreciable to him that he was keeping her. The long embrace in which they held each other was the rout of evasion, and he took from it the certitude that what she had from him was real to her. It was stronger than an uttered vow, and the name he was to give it in afterthought was that she had been sublimely sincere. *That* was all he asked—sincerity making a basis that would bear almost anything. This settled so much, and settled it so thoroughly, that there was nothing left to ask her to swear to. Oaths and vows apart, now they could talk. It seemed in fact only now that their questions were put on the table. He had taken up more expressly at the end of five minutes her plea for her own plan, and it was marked that the difference made by the passage just enacted was a difference in favour of her choice of means. Means had somehow suddenly become a detail—her province and her care; it had grown more consistently vivid that her intelligence was one with her passion. “I certainly don’t want,” he said—and he could say it with a smile of indulgence—“to be all the while bringing it up that I don’t trust you.”

“I should hope not! What do you think I want to do?”

He had really at this to make out a little what he thought, and the first thing that put itself in evidence was of course the oddity, after all, of their game, to which he could but frankly allude. “We’re doing, at the best, in trying to temporise in so special a way, a thing most people would call us fools for.” But his visit passed, all the same, without his again attempting to make “just as he was” serve. He had no more money just as he was than he had had just as he had been, or than he should have, probably, when it came to that, just as he always would be; whereas she, on her side, in comparison with her state of some months before, had measureably more to relinquish. He easily saw how their meeting at Lancaster Gate gave more of an accent to that quantity than their meeting at stations or in parks; and yet on the other hand he couldn’t urge this against it. If Mrs. Lowder was indifferent her indifference added in a manner to what Kate’s taking him as he was would call on her to sacrifice. Such in fine was her art with him that she seemed to put the question of their still waiting into quite other terms than the terms of ugly blue, of florid Sèvres,[am] of complicated brass, in which their boudoir expressed it. She said almost all in fact by saying, on this article of Aunt Maud, after he had once more pressed her, that when he should see her, as must inevitably soon happen, he would understand. “Do you mean,” he asked at this, “that there’s any *definite* sign of her coming round? I’m not talking,” he explained, “of mere hypocrisies in her, or mere brave duplicities. Remember, after all, that supremely clever as we are, and as strong a team, I admit, as there is going—remember that she can play with us quite as much as we play with her.”

“She doesn’t want to play with *me,* my dear,” Kate lucidly replied; “she doesn’t want to make me suffer a

bit more than she need. She cares for me too much, and everything she does or doesn't do has a value. *This* has a value—her being as she has been about us to-day. I believe she's in her room, where she's keeping strictly to herself while you're here with me. But that isn't 'playing' —not a bit."

"What is it then," the young man returned—"from the moment it isn't her blessing and a cheque?"

Kate was complete. "It's simply her absence of smallness. There is something in her above trifles. She *generally* trusts us; she doesn't propose to hunt us into corners; and if we frankly ask for a thing—why," said Kate, "she shrugs, but she lets it go. She has really but one fault—she's indifferent, on such ground as she has taken about us, to details. However," the girl cheerfully went on, "it isn't in detail we fight her."

"It seems to me," Densher brought out after a moment's thought of this, "that it's in detail we deceive her"—a speech that, as soon as he had uttered it, applied itself for him, as also visibly for his companion, to the afterglow of their recent embrace.

Any confusion attaching to this adventure, however, dropped from Kate, whom, as he could see with sacred joy, it must take more than that to make compunctious. "I don't say we can do it again. I mean," she explained, "meet here."

Densher indeed had been wondering where they could do it again. If Lancaster Gate was so limited that issue reappeared. "I mayn't come back at all?"

"Certainly—to see her. It's she, really," his companion smiled, "who's in love with you."

But it made him—a trifle more grave—look at her a moment. "Don't make out, you know, that every one's in love with me."

She hesitated. "I don't say every one."

"You said just now Miss Theale."

"I said she liked you—yes."

"Well, it comes to the same thing." With which, however, he pursued: "Of course I ought to thank Mrs. Lowder in person. I mean for *this*—as from myself."

"Ah but, you know, not too much!" She had an ironic gaiety for the implications of his "this," besides wishing to insist on a general prudence. "She'll wonder what you're thanking her for!"

Densher did justice to both considerations. "Yes, I can't very well tell her all."

It was perhaps because he said it so gravely that Kate was again in a manner amused. Yet she gave out light. "You can't very well 'tell' her anything, and that doesn't matter. Only be nice to her.

Please her; make her see how clever you are—only without letting her see that you're trying. If you're charming to her you've nothing else to do."

But she oversimplified too. "I can be 'charming' to her, so far as I see, only by letting her suppose I give you up—which I'll be hanged if I do! It is," he said with feeling, "a game."

"Of course it's a game. But she'll never suppose you give me up—or I give *you*—if you keep reminding her how you enjoy our interviews."

"Then if she has to see us as obstinate and constant," Densher asked, "what good does it do?"

Kate was for a moment checked. "What good does what—?"

"Does my pleasing her—does anything. I *can't,"* he impatiently declared, "please her."

Kate looked at him hard again, disappointed at his want of consistency; but it appeared to determine in her something better than a mere complaint. "Then I can! Leave it to me." With which she came to him under the compulsion, again, that had united them shortly before, and took hold of him in her urgency to the same tender purpose. It was her form of entreaty renewed and repeated, which made after all, as he met it, their great fact clear. And it somehow clarified *all* things so to possess each other. The effect of it was that, once more, on these terms, he could only be generous. He had so on the spot then left everything to her that she reverted in the course of a few moments to one of her previous—and as positively seemed—her most precious ideas. "You accused me just now of saying that Milly's in love with you. Well, if you come to that, I do say it. So there you are. That's the good she'll do us. It makes a basis for her seeing you—so that she'll help us to go on."

Densher stared—she was wondrous all round. "And what sort of a basis does it make for my seeing *her?"*

“Oh I don’t mind!” Kate smiled.

“Don’t mind my leading her on?”

She put it differently. “Don’t mind her leading *you.”*

“Well, she won’t—so it’s nothing not to mind. But how can that ‘help’,” he pursued, “with what she knows?”

“What she knows? That needn’t prevent.”

He wondered. “Prevent her loving us?”

“Prevent her helping you. She’s *like* that,” Kate Croy explained.

It took indeed some understanding. “Making nothing of the fact that I love another?”

“Making everything,” said Kate. “To console you.”

“But for what?”

“For not getting your other.”

He continued to stare. “But how does she know—?”

“That you *won’t* get her? She doesn’t; but on the other hand she doesn’t know you will. Meanwhile she sees you baffled, for she knows of Aunt Maud’s stand. *That”*—Kate was lucid—“gives her the chance to be nice to you.”

“And what does it give *me,”* the young man none the less rationally asked, “the chance to be? A brute of a humbug to her?”

Kate so possessed her facts, as it were, that she smiled at his violence. “You’ll extraordinarily like her. She’s exquisite. And there are reasons. I mean others.”

“What others?”

“Well, I’ll tell you another time.[17] Those I give you,” the girl added, “are enough to go on with.”

“To go on to what?”

“Why, to seeing her again—say as soon as you can: which, moreover, on all grounds, is no more than decent of you.”

He of course took in her reference, and he had fully in mind what had passed between them in New York. It had been no great quantity, but it had made distinctly at the time for his pleasure; so that anything in the nature of an appeal in the name of it could have a slight kindling consequence. “Oh I shall naturally call again without delay. Yes,” said Densher, “her being in love with me is nonsense; but I must, quite independently of that, make every acknowledgement of favours received.”

It appeared practically all Kate asked. “Then you see. I shall meet you there.”

“I don’t quite see,” he presently returned, “why she should wish to receive you for it.”

“She receives me for myself—that is for *her* self. She thinks no end of me. That I should have to drum it into you!”

Yet still he didn’t take it. “Then I confess she’s beyond me.”

Well, Kate could but leave it as she saw it. “She regards me as already—in these few weeks—her dearest friend. It’s quite separate. We’re in, she and I, ever so deep.” And it was to confirm this that, as if it had flashed upon her that he was somewhere at sea, she threw out at last her own real light. “She doesn’t of course know I care for *you.* She thinks I care so little that it’s not worth speaking of.” That he *had* been somewhere at sea these remarks made quickly clear, and Kate hailed the effect with surprise. “Have you been supposing that she does know—?”

“About our situation? Certainly, if you’re such friends as you show me—and if you haven’t otherwise represented it to her.” She uttered at this such a sound of impatience that he stood artlessly vague. “You *have* denied it to her?”

She threw up her arms at his being so backward. “ ‘Denied it’? My dear man, we’ve never spoken of you.”

“Never, never?”

“Strange as it may appear to your glory—never.”

He couldn't piece it together. "But won't Mrs. Lowder have spoken?"

"Very probably. But of you. Not of me."

This struck him as obscure. "How does she know me but as part and parcel of you?"

"How?" Kate triumphantly asked. "Why exactly to make nothing of it, to have nothing to do with it, to stick consistently to her line about it. Aunt Maud's line is to keep all reality out of our relation—that is out of my being in danger from you—by not having so much as suspected or heard of it. She'll get rid of it, as she believes, by ignoring it and sinking it—if she only does so hard enough. Therefore *she,* in her manner, 'denies' it if you will. That's how she knows you otherwise than as part and parcel of me. She won't for a moment have allowed either to Mrs. Stringham or to Milly that I've in any way, as they say, distinguished you."

"And you don't suppose," said Densher, "that, they must have made it out for themselves?"

"No, my dear, I don't; not even," Kate declared, "after Milly's so funnily bumping against us on Tuesday."

"She doesn't see from *that*—?"

"That you're, so to speak, mad about me. Yes, she sees, no doubt, that you regard me with a complacent eye—for you show it, I think, always too much and too crudely. But nothing beyond that. *I* don't show it too much; I don't perhaps—to please you completely where others are concerned—show it enough."

"Can you show it or not as you like?" Densher demanded.

It pulled her up a little, but she came out resplendent. "Not where you are concerned. Beyond seeing that you're rather gone," she went on, "Milly only sees that I'm decently good to you."

"Very good indeed she must think it!"

"Very good indeed then. She easily sees me," Kate smiled, "as very good indeed."

The young man brooded. "But in a sense to take some explaining. "

"Then I explain." She was really fine; it came back to her essential plea for her freedom of action and his beauty of trust. "I mean," she added, "I *will* explain."

"And what will J do?"

"Recognise the difference it must make if she thinks." But here in truth Kate faltered. It was his silence alone that, for the moment, took up her apparent meaning; and before he again spoke she had returned to remembrance and prudence. They were now not to forget that, Aunt Maud's liberality having put them on their honour, they mustn't spoil their case by abusing it. He must leave her in time; they should probably find it would help them. But she came back to Milly too. "Mind you go to see her."

Densher still, however, took up nothing of this. "Then I may come again?"

"For Aunt Maud—as much as you like. But we can't again," said Kate, "play her *this* trick. I can't see you here alone."

"Then where?"

"Go to see Milly," she for all satisfaction repeated.

"And what good will that do me?"

"Try it and you'll see."

"You mean you'll manage to be there?" Densher asked. "Say you are, how will that give us privacy?"

"Try it—you'll see," the girl once more returned. "We must manage as we can."

"That's precisely what I feel. It strikes me we might manage better." His idea of this was a thing that made him an instant hesitate; yet he brought it out with conviction. "Why won't you come to *me?"*

It was a question her troubled eyes seemed to tell him he was scarce generous in expecting her definitely to answer, and by looking to him to wait at least she appealed to something that she presently made him feel as his pity. It was on that special shade of tenderness that he thus found himself thrown back; and while he asked of his spirit and of his flesh just what concession they could arrange she pressed him yet again on the subject of her singular remedy for their embarrassment. It might have been irritating had she ever struck him as having in her mind a stupid corner. "You'll see," she said, "the difference it will make."

Well, since she wasn't stupid she was intelligent; it was he who was stupid—the proof of which was that he would do what she liked. But he made a last effort to understand, her allusion to the "difference" bringing him

round to it. He indeed caught at something subtle but strong even as he spoke. “Is what you meant a moment ago that the difference will be in her being made to believe you hate me?”

Kate, however, had simply, for this gross way of putting it, one of her more marked shows of impatience; with which in fact she sharply closed their discussion. He opened the door on a sign from her, and she accompanied him to the top of the stairs with an air of having so put their possibilities before him that questions were idle and doubts peryerse. “I verily believe I *shall* hate you if you spoil for me the beauty of what I see!”

—III—

He was really, notwithstanding, to hear more from her of what she saw; and the very next occasion had for him still other surprises than that. He received from Mrs. Lowder on the morning after his visit to Kate the telegraphic expression of a hope that he might be free to dine with them that evening; and his freedom affected him as fortunate even though in some degree qualified by her missive. “Expecting American friends whom I’m so glad to find you know!” His knowledge of American friends was clearly an accident of which he was to taste the fruit to the last bitterness. This apprehension, however, we hasten to add, enjoyed for him, in the immediate event, a certain merciful shrinkage; the immediate event being that, at Lancaster Gate, five minutes after his due arrival, prescribed him for eight-thirty, Mrs. Stringham came in alone. The long daylight, the postponed lamps, the habit of the hour, made dinners late and guests still later; so that, punctual as he was, he had found Mrs. Lowder alone, with Kate herself not yet in the field. He had thus had with her several bewildering moments—bewildering by reason, fairly, of their tacit invitation to him to be supernaturally simple. This was exactly, goodness knew, what he wanted to be; but he had never had it so largely and freely—so supernaturally simply, for that matter—imputed to him as of easy achievement. It was a particular in which Aunt Maud appeared to offer herself as an example, appeared to say quite agreeably : “What I want of you, don’t you see? is to be just exactly as *I* am.” The quantity of the article required was what might especially have caused him to stagger—he liked so, in general, the quantities in which Mrs. Lowder dealt. He would have liked as well to ask her how feasible she supposed it for a poor young man to resemble her at any point; but he had after all soon enough perceived that he was doing as she wished by letting his wonder show just a little as silly. He was conscious moreover of a small strange dread of the results of discussion with her—strange, truly, because it was her good nature, not her asperity, that he feared. Asperity might have made him angry—in which there was always a comfort; good nature, in his conditions, had a tendency to make him ashamed—which Aunt Maud indeed, wonderfully, liking him for himself, quite struck him as having guessed. To spare him therefore she also avoided discussion; she kept him down by refusing to quarrel with him. This was what she now proposed to him to enjoy, and his secret discomfort was his sense that on the whole it was what would best suit him. Being kept down was a bore, but his great dread, verily, was of being ashamed, which was a thing distinct; and it mattered but little that he was ashamed of that too.

It was of the essence of his position that in such a house as this the tables could always be turned on him. “What do you offer, what do you offer?”—the place, however muffled in convenience and decorum, constantly hummed for him with that thick irony. The irony was a renewed reference to obvious bribes, and he had already seen how little aid came to him from denouncing the bribes as ugly in form. That was what the precious metals—they alone—could afford to be; it was vain enough for him accordingly to try to impart a gloss to his own comparative brummagem.[an] The humiliation of this impotence was precisely what Aunt Maud sought to mitigate for him by keeping him down; and as her effort to that end had doubtless never yet been so visible he had probably never felt so definitely placed in the world as while he waited with her for her half-dozen other guests. She welcomed him genially back from the States, as to his view of which her few questions, though not coherent, were comprehensive, and he had the amusement of seeing in her, as through a clear glass, the outbreak of a plan and the sudden consciousness of a curiosity. She became aware of America, under his eyes, as a possible scene for social operations ; the idea of a visit to the wonderful country had clearly but just occurred to her, yet she was talking of it, at the end of a minute, as her favourite dream. He didn’t believe in it, but he pretended to; this helped her as well as anything else to treat him as harmless and blameless. She was so engaged, with the further aid of a complete absence of allusions, when the highest effect was given her method by the beautiful entrance of Kate. The method therefore received support all round, for no young man could have been less formidable than the person to the relief of whose shyness her niece ostensibly came. The ostensible, in Kate, struck him altogether, on this occasion, as prodigious; while scarcely less prodigious, for that matter, was his own reading, on the spot, of the relation between his companions—a relation lighted for him by the straight look, not exactly loving nor lingering, yet searching and soft, that, on the part of their hostess, the girl had to reckon with as she advanced. It took her in from

head to foot, and in doing so it told a story that made poor Densher again the least bit sick: it marked so something with which Kate habitually and consummately reckoned.

That was the story—that she was always, for her beneficent dragon, under arms; living up, every hour, but especially at festal hours, to the "value" Mrs. Lowder had attached to her. High and fixed, this estimate ruled on each occasion at Lancaster Gate the social scene; so that he now recognised in it something like the artistic idea, the plastic substance, imposed by tradition, by genius, by criticism, in respect to a given character, on a distinguished actress. As such a person was to dress the part, to walk, to look, to speak, in every way to express, the part, so all this was what Kate was to do for the character she had undertaken, under her aunt's roof, to represent. It was made up, the character, of definite elements and touches—things all perfectly ponderable to criticism; and the way for her to meet criticism was evidently at the start to be sure her make-up had had the last touch and that she looked at least no worse than usual. Aunt Maud's appreciation of that tonight was indeed managerial, and the performer's own contribution fairly that of the faultless soldier on parade. Densher saw himself for the moment as in his purchased stall at the play; the watchful manager was in the depths of a box and the poor actress in the glare of the footlights. But she *passed,* the poor performer—he could see how she always passed; her wig, her paint, her jewels, every mark of her expression impeccable, and her entrance accordingly greeted with the proper round of applause. Such impressions as we thus note for Densher come and go, it must be granted, in very much less time than notation demands; but we may none the less make the point that there was, still further, time among them for him to feel almost too scared to take part in the ovation. He struck himself as having lost, for the minute, his presence of mind—so that in any case he only stared in silence at the older woman's technical challenge and at the younger one's disciplined face. It was as if the drama—it thus came to him, for the fact of a drama there was no blinking—was between them, them quite preponderantly; with Merton Densher relegated to mere spectatorship, a paying place in front, and one of the most expensive. This was why his appreciation had turned for the instant to fear—had just turned, as we have said, to sickness; and in spite of the fact that the disciplined face did offer him over the footlights, as he believed, the small gleam, fine faint but exquisite, of a special intelligence. So might a practised performer, even when raked by double-barrelled glasses, seem to be all in her part and yet convey a sign to the person in the house she loved best.

The drama, at all events, as Densher saw it, meanwhile went on—amplified soon enough by the advent of two other guests, stray gentlemen both, stragglers in the rout of the season, who visibly presented themselves to Kate during the next moments as subjects for a like impersonal treatment and sharers in a like usual mercy. At opposite ends of the social course, they displayed, in respect to the "figure" that each, in his way, made, one the expansive, the other the contractile effect of the perfect white waistcoat. A scratch company of two innocuous youths and a pacified veteran was therefore what now offered itself to Mrs. Stringham, who rustled in a little breathless and full of the compunction of having had to come alone. Her companion, at the last moment, had been indisposed—positively not well enough, and so had packed her off, insistently, with excuses, with wild regrets. This circumstance of their charming friend's illness was the first thing Kate took up with Densher on their being able after dinner, without bravado, to have ten minutes "naturally," as she called it—which wasn't what he did—together; but it was already as if the young man had, by an odd impression, throughout the meal, not been wholly deprived of Miss Theale's participation. Mrs. Lowder had made dear Milly the topic, and it proved, on the spot, a topic as familiar to the enthusiastic younger as to the sagacious older man. Any knowledge they might lack Mrs. Lowder's niece was moreover alert to supply, while Densher himself was freely appealed to as the most privileged, after all, of the group. Wasn't it he who had in a manner invented the wonderful creature—through having seen her first, caught her in her native jungle? Hadn't he more or less paved the way for her by his prompt recognition of her rarity, by preceding her, in a friendly spirit—as he had the "ear" of society—with a sharp flashlight or two?

He met, poor Densher, these enquiries as he could, listening with interest, yet with discomfort; wincing in particular, dry journalist as he was, to find it seemingly supposed of him that he had put his pen—oh his "pen!"—at the service of private distinction. The ear of society?—they were talking, or almost, as if he had publicly paragraphed a modest young lady. They dreamt dreams, in truth, he appeared to perceive, that fairly waked *him* up, and he settled himself in his place both to resist his embarrassment and to catch the full revelation. His embarrassment came naturally from the fact that if he could claim no credit for Miss Theale's success, so neither could he gracefully insist on his not having been concerned with her. What touched him most nearly was that the occasion took on somehow the air of a commemorative banquet, a feast to celebrate a brilliant if brief career. There was of course more said about the heroine than if she hadn't been absent, and he found himself rather stupefied at the range of Milly's triumph. Mrs. Lowder had wonders to tell of it; the two wearers of the waistcoat, either with sincerity or with hypocrisy, professed in the matter an equal expertness; and Densher at last seemed to know himself in presence of a social "case." It was Mrs. Stringham, obviously, whose testimony would have been most invoked hadn't she been, as her friend's representative, rather confined to the function of inhaling the incense; so that Kate, who treated her beautifully, smiling at her, cheering and consoling her across the table, appeared benevolently both to speak and to interpret for her. Kate spoke as if she wouldn't perhaps understand *their* way of appreciating Milly, but would let them none the

less, in justice to their good will, express it in their coarser fashion. Densher himself wasn't unconscious in respect to this of a certain broad brotherhood with Mrs. Stringham; wondering indeed, while he followed the talk, how it might move American nerves. He had only heard of them before, but in his recent tour he had caught them in the remarkable fact, and there was now a moment or two when it came to him that he had perhaps—and not in the way of an escape—taken a lesson from them.

They quivered, clearly, they hummed and drummed, they leaped and bounded in Mrs. Stringham's typical organism—this lady striking him as before all things excited, as, in the native phrase, keyed-up, to a perception of more elements in the occasion than he was himself able to count. She was accessible to sides of it, he imagined, that were as yet obscure to him; for, though she unmistakeably rejoiced and soared, he none the less saw her at moments as even more agitated than pleasure required. It was a state of emotion in her that could scarce represent simply an impatience to report at home. Her little dry New England brightness—he had "sampled" all the shades of the American complexity, if complexity it were—had its actual reasons for finding relief most in silence; so that before the subject was changed he perceived (with surprise at the others) that they had given her enough of it. He had quite had enough of it himself by the time he was asked if it were true that their friend had really not made in her own country the mark she had chalked so large in London. It was Mrs. Lowder herself who addressed him that enquiry; while he scarce knew if he were the more impressed with her launching it under Mrs. Stringham's nose or with her hope that he would allow to London the honour of discovery. The less expansive of the white waistcoats propounded the theory that they saw in London—for all that was said—much further than in the States: it wouldn't be the first time, he urged, that they had taught the Americans to appreciate (especially when it was funny) some native product. He didn't mean that Miss Theale was funny—though she was weird, and this was precisely her magic; but it might very well be that New York, in having her to show, hadn't been aware of its luck. There were plenty of people who were nothing over there and yet were awfully taken up in England; just as—to make the balance right, thank goodness—they sometimes sent out beauties and celebrities who left the Briton cold. The Briton's temperature in truth wasn't to be calculated—a formulation of the matter that was not reached, however, without producing in Mrs. Stringham a final feverish sally. She announced that if the point of view for a proper admiration of her young friend had seemed to fail a little in New York, there was no manner of doubt of her having carried Boston by storm. It pointed the moral that Boston, for the finer taste, left New York nowhere; and the good lady, as the exponent of this doctrine—which she set forth at a certain length—made, obviously, to Densher's mind, her nearest approach to supplying the weirdness in which Milly's absence had left them deficient. She made it indeed effective for him by suddenly addressing him. "You know nothing, sir—but not the least little bit—about my friend."

He hadn't pretended he did, but there was a purity of reproach in Mrs. Stringham's face and tone, a purity charged apparently with solemn meanings; so that for a little, small as had been his claim, he couldn't but feel that she exaggerated. He wondered what she did mean, but while doing so he defended himself. "I certainly don't know enormously much—beyond her having been most kind to me, in New York, as a poor bewildered and newly landed alien, and my having tremendously appreciated it." To which he added, he scarce knew why, what had an immediate success. "Remember, Mrs. Stringham, that you weren't then present."

"Ah there you are!" said Kate with much gay expression, though what it expressed he failed at the time to make out.

"You weren't present *then,* dearest," Mrs. Lowder richly concurred. "You don't know," she continued with mellow gaiety, "how far things may have gone."

It made the little woman, he could see, really lose her head. She had more things in that head than any of them in any other; unless perhaps it were Kate, whom he felt as indirectly watching him during this foolish passage, though it pleased him—and because of the foolishness—not to meet her eyes. He met Mrs. Stringham's, which affected him: with her he could on occasion clear it up—a sense produced by the mute communion between them and really the beginning, as the event was to show, of something extraordinary. It was even already a little the effect of this communion that Mrs. Stringham perceptibly faltered in her retort to Mrs. Lowder's joke. "Oh it's precisely my point that Mr. Densher can't have had vast opportunities." And then she smiled at him. "I wasn't away, you know, long."

It made everything, in the oddest way in the world, immediately right for him. "And I wasn't *there* long, either." He positively saw with it that nothing for him, so far as she was concerned, would again be wrong. "She's beautiful, but I don't say she's easy to know."

"Ah she's a thousand and one things!" replied the good lady, as if now to keep well with him.

He asked nothing better. "She was off with you to these parts before I knew it. I myself was off too—away off to wonderful parts, where I had endlessly more to see."

"But you didn't forget her!" Aunt Maud interposed with almost menacing archness.

“No, of course I didn’t forget her. One doesn’t forget such charming impressions. But I never,” he lucidly maintained, “chattered to others about her.”

“She’ll thank you for that, sir,” said Mrs. Stringham with a flushed firmness.

“Yet doesn’t silence in such a case,” Aunt Maud blandly enquired, “very often quite prove the depth of the impression?”

He would have been amused, hadn’t he been slightly displeased, at all they seemed desirous to fasten on him. “Well, the impression was as deep as you like. But I really want Miss Theale to know,” he pursued for Mrs. Stringham, “that I don’t figure by any consent of my own as an authority about her.”

Kate came to his assistance—if assistance it was—before their friend had had time to meet this charge. “You’re right about her not being easy to know. One sees her with intensity—sees her more than one sees almost any one; but then one discovers that that isn’t knowing her and that one may know better a person whom one doesn’t ‘see,’ as I say, half so much.”

The discrimination was interesting, but it brought them back to the fact of her success; and it was at that comparatively gross circumstance, now so fully placed before them, that Milly’s anxious companion sat and looked—looked very much as some spectator in an old-time circus might have watched the oddity of a Christian maiden, in the arena, mildly, caressingly, martyred. It was the nosing and fumbling not of lions and tigers but of domestic animals let loose as for the joke. Even the joke made Mrs. Stringham uneasy, and her mute communion with Densher, to which we have alluded, was more and more determined by it. He wondered afterwards if Kate had made this out; though it was not indeed till much later on that he found himself, in thought, dividing the things she might have been conscious of from the things she must have missed. If she actually missed, at any rate, Mrs. Stringham’s discomfort, that but showed how her own idea held her. Her own idea was, by insisting on the fact of the girl’s prominence as a feature of the season’s end, to keep Densher in relation, for the rest of them, both to present and to past. “It’s everything that has happened *since* that makes you naturally a little shy about her. You don’t know what has happened since, but we do; we’ve seen it and followed it; we’ve a little been *of* it.”The great thing for him, at this, as Kate gave it, was in fact quite irresistibly that the case was a real one—the kind of thing that, when one’s patience was shorter than one’s curiosity, one had vaguely taken for possible in London, but in which one had never been even to this small extent concerned. The little American’s sudden social adventure, her happy and, no doubt, harmless flourish, had probably been favoured by several accidents, but it had been favoured above all by the simple spring-board of the scene, by one of those common caprices of the numberless foolish flock, gregarious movements as inscrutable as ocean-currents. The huddled herd had drifted to her blindly—it might as blindly have drifted away. There had been of course a signal, but the great reason was probably the absence at the moment of a larger lion. The bigger beast would come and the smaller would then incontinently vanish. It was at all events characteristic, and what was of the essence of it was grist to his scribbling mill, matter for his journalising hand. That hand already, in intention, played over it, the “motive,” as a sign of the season, a feature of the time, of the purely expeditious and rough-and-tumble nature of the social boom. The boom as in *itself* required—that would be the note; the subject of the process a comparatively minor question. Anything was boomable enough when nothing else was more so: the author of the “rotten” book, the beauty who was no beauty, the heiress who was only that, the stranger who was for the most part saved from being inconveniently strange but by being inconveniently familiar, the American whose Americanism had been long desperately discounted, the creature in fine as to whom spangles or spots of any sufficiently marked and exhibited sort could be loudly enough predicated.

So he judged at least, within his limits, and the idea that what he had thus caught in the fact was the trick of fashion and the tone of society went so far as to make him take up again his sense of independence. He had supposed himself civilised; but if this was civilisation—! One could smoke one’s pipe outside when twaddle was within. He had rather avoided, as we have remarked, Kate’s eyes, but there came a moment when he would fairly have liked to put it, across the table, to her: “I say, light of my life, is this the great world?” There came another, it must be added— and doubtless as a result of something that, over the cloth, did hang between them—when she struck him as having quite answered : “Dear no—for what do you take me? Not the least little bit: only a poor silly, though quite harmless, imitation.” What she might have passed for saying, however, was practically merged in what she did say, for she came overtly to his aid, very much as if guessing some of his thoughts. She enunciated, to relieve his bewilderment, the obvious truth that you couldn’t leave London for three months at that time of the year and come back to find your friends just where they were. As they had of course been jigging away they might well be so red in the face that you wouldn’t know them. She reconciled in fine his disclaimer about Milly with that honour of having discovered her which it was vain for him modestly to shirk. He had unearthed her, but it was they, all of them together, who had developed her. She was always a charmer, one of the greatest ever seen, but she wasn’t the person he had “backed.”

Densher was to feel sure afterwards that Kate had had in these pleasantries no conscious, above all no insolent purpose of making light of poor Susan Shepherd’s property in their young friend—which property, by

such remarks, was very much pushed to the wall; but he was also to know that Mrs. Stringham had secretly resented them, Mrs. Stringham holding the opinion, of which he was ultimately to have a glimpse, that all the Kate Croys in Christendom were but dust for the feet of her Milly. That, it was true, would be what she must reveal only when driven to her last entrenchments and well cornered in her passion—the rare passion of friendship, the sole passion of her little life save the one other, more imperturbably cerebral, that she entertained for the art of Guy de Maupassant.[ao] She slipped in the observation that her Milly was incapable of change, was just exactly, on the contrary, the same Milly; but this made little difference in the drift of Kate's contention. She was perfectly kind to Susie: it was as if she positively knew her as handicapped for any disagreement by feeling that she, Kate, had "type," and by being committed to admiration of type. Kate had occasion subsequently—she found it somehow—to mention to our young man Milly's having spoken to her of this view on the good lady's part. She would like—Milly had had it from her—to put Kate Croy in a book and see what she could so do with her. "Chop me up fine or serve me whole"—it was a way of being got at that Kate professed she dreaded. It would be Mrs. Stringham's however, she understood, because Mrs. Stringham, oddly, felt that with such stuff as the strange English girl was made of, stuff that (in spite of Maud Manningham, who was full of sentiment) she had never known, there was none other to be employed. These things were of later evidence, yet Densher might even then have felt them in the air. They were practically in it already when Kate, waiving the question of her friend's chemical change, wound up with the comparatively unobjectionable proposition that he must now, having missed so much, take them all up, on trust, further on. He met it peacefully, a little perhaps as an example to Mrs. Stringham—" Oh as far on as you like!" This even had its effect: Mrs. Stringham appropriated as much of it as might be meant for herself. The nice thing about her was that she could measure how much; so that by the time dinner was over they had really covered ground.

—IV—

The younger of the other men, it afterwards appeared, was most in his element at the piano; so that they had coffee and comic songs upstairs—the gentlemen, temporarily relinquished, submitting easily in this interest to Mrs. Lowder's parting injunction not to sit too tight. Our especial young man sat tighter when restored to the drawing-room; he made it out perfectly with Kate that they might, off and on, foregather without offence. He had perhaps stronger needs in this general respect than she; but she had better names for the scant risks to which she consented. It was the blessing of a big house that intervals were large and, of an August night, that windows were open; whereby, at a given moment, on the wide balcony, with the songs sufficiently sung, Aunt Maud could hold her little court more freshly. Densher and Kate, during these moments, occupied side by side a small sofa—a luxury formulated by the latter as the proof, under criticism, of their remarkably good conscience. "To seem not to know each other—once you're here—would be," the girl said, "to overdo it"; and she arranged it charmingly that they *must* have some passage to put Aunt Maud off the scent. She would be wondering otherwise what in the world they found their account in. For Densher, none the less, the profit of snatched moments, snatched contacts, was partial and poor; there were in particular at present more things in his mind than he could bring out while watching the windows. It was true, on the other hand, that she suddenly met most of them—and more than he could see on the spot—by coming out for him with a reference to Milly that was not in the key of those made at dinner. "She's not a bit right, you know. I mean in health. Just see her to-night. I mean it looks grave. For you she would have come, you know, if it had been at all possible."

He took this in such patience as he could muster. "What in the world's the matter with her?"

But Kate continued without saying. "Unless indeed your being here has been just a reason for her funking it."

"What in the world's the matter with her?" Densher asked again.

"Why just what I've told you—that she likes you so much."

"Then why should she deny herself the joy of meeting me?"

Kate cast about—it would take so long to explain. "And perhaps it's true that she is bad. She easily may be."

"Quite easily, I should say, judging by Mrs. Stringham, who's visibly preoccupied and worried."

"Visibly enough. Yet it mayn't," said Kate, "be only for that."

"For what then?"

But this question too, on thinking, she neglected. “Why, if it’s anything real, doesn’t that poor lady go home? She’d be anxious, and she has done all she need to be civil.”

“I think,” Derisher remarked, “she has been quite beautifully civil.”

It made Kate, he fancied, look at him the least bit harder; but she was already, in a manner, explaining. “Her preoccupation is probably on two different heads. One of them would make her hurry back, but the other makes her stay. She’s commissioned to tell Milly all about you.”

“Well then,” said the young man between a laugh and a sigh, “I’m glad I felt, downstairs, a kind of ‘drawing’ to her. Wasn’t I rather decent to her?”

“Awfully nice. You’ve instincts, you fiend. It’s all,” Kate declared, “as it should be.”

“Except perhaps,” he after a moment cynically suggested, “that she isn’t getting much good of me now. Will she report to Milly on this?” And then as Kate seemed to wonder what “this” might be: “On our present disregard for appearances.”

“Ah leave appearances to me!” She spoke in her high way. “I’ll make them all right. Aunt Maud, moreover,” she added, “has her so engaged that she won’t notice.” Densher felt, with this, that his companion had indeed perceptive flights he couldn’t hope to match—had for instance another when she still subjoined: “And Mrs. Stringham’s appearing to respond just in order to make that impression. ”

“Well,” Densher dropped with some humour, “life’s very interesting ! I hope it’s really as much so for you as you make it for others ; I mean judging by what you make it for me. You seem to me to represent it as thrilling for *ces dames,* [ap] and in a different way for each: Aunt Maud, Susan Shepherd, Milly. But what is,” he wound up, “the matter? Do you mean she’s as ill as she looks?”

Kate’s face struck him as replying at first that his derisive speech deserved no satisfaction; then she appeared to yield to a need of her own—the need to make the point that “as ill as she looked” was what Milly scarce could be. If she had been as ill as she looked she could scarce be a question with them, for her end would in that case be near. She believed herself nevertheless—and Kate couldn’t help believing her too—seriously menaced. There was always the fact that they had been on the point of leav- ing town, the two ladies, and had suddenly been pulled up. “We bade them good-bye—or all but—Aunt Maud and I, the night before Milly, popping so very oddly into the National Gallery for a farewell look, found you and me together. They were then to get off a day or two later. But they’ve not got off—they’re not getting off. When I see them—and I saw them this morning—they have showy reasons. They do mean to go, but they’ve postponed it.” With which the girl brought out: “They’ve postponed it for you.” He protested so far as a man might without fatuity, since a protest was itself credulous; but Kate, as ever, understood herself. “You’ve made Milly change her mind. She wants not to miss you—though she wants also not to show she wants you; which is why, as I hinted a moment ago, she may consciously have hung back to-night. She doesn’t know when she may see you again—she doesn’t know she ever may. She doesn’t see the future. It has opened out before her in these last weeks as a dark confused thing.”

Densher wondered. “After the tremendous time you’ve all been telling me she has had?”

“That’s it. There’s a shadow across it.”

“The shadow, you consider, of some physical break-up?”

“Some physical break-down. Nothing less. She’s scared. She has so much to lose. And she wants more.”

“Ah well,” said Densher with a sudden strange sense of discomfort, “couldn’t one say to her that she can’t have everything?”

“No—for one wouldn’t want to. She really,” Kate went on, “has been somebody here. Ask Aunt Maud—you may think me prejudiced,” the girl oddly smiled. “Aunt Maud will tell you—the world’s before her. It has all come since you saw her, and it’s a pity you’ve missed it, for it certainly would have amused you. She has really been a perfect success—I mean of course so far as possible in the scrap of time—and she has taken it like a perfect angel. If you can imagine an angel with a thumping bank-account you’ll have the simplest expression of the kind of thing. Her fortune’s absolutely huge; Aunt Maud has had all the facts, or enough of them, in the last confidence, from ‘Susie,’ and Susie speaks by book. Take them then, in the last confidence, from me. There she is.” Kate expressed above all what it most came to. “It’s open to her to make, you see, the very greatest marriage. I assure you we’re not vulgar about her. Her possibilities are quite plain.”

Densher showed he neither disbelieved nor grudged them. “But what good then on earth can I do her?”

Well, she had it ready. “You can console her.”

“And for what?”

“For all that, if she’s stricken, she must see swept away. I shouldn’t care for her if she hadn’t so much,” Kate very simply said. And then as it made him laugh not quite happily: “I shouldn’t trouble about her if there were one thing she did have.” The girl spoke indeed with a noble compassion. “She has nothing.”

“Not all the young dukes?”

“Well we must see—see if anything can come of them. She at any rate does love life. To have met a person like you,” Kate further explained, “is to have felt you become, with all the other fine things, a part of life. Oh she has you arranged!”

“You have, it strikes me, my dear”—and he looked both detached and rueful. “Pray what am I to do with the dukes?”

“Oh the dukes will be disappointed!”

“Then why shan’t I be?”

“You’ll have expected less,” Kate wonderfully smiled. “Besides, you will be. You’ll have expected enough for that.”

“Yet it’s what you want to let me in for?”

“I want,” said the girl, “to make things pleasant for her. I use, for the purpose, what I have. You’re what I have of most precious, and you’re therefore what I use most.”

He looked at her long. “I wish I could use you a little more.” After which, as she continued to smile at him, “Is it a bad case of lungs?” he asked.

Kate showed for a little as if she wished it might be. “Not lungs, I think. Isn’t consumption, taken in time, now curable?”

“People are, no doubt, patched up.” But he wondered. “Do you mean she has something that’s past patching?” And before she could answer: “It’s really as if her appearance put her outside of such things—being, in spite of her youth, that of a person who has been through all it’s conceivable she should be exposed to. She affects one, I should say, as a creature saved from a shipwreck. Such a creature may surely, in these days, on the doctrine of chances, go to sea again with confidence. She has *had* her wreck—she has met her adventure.”

“Oh I grant you her wreck!”—Kate was all response so far. “But do let her have still her adventure. There are wrecks that are not adventures.”

“Well—if there be also adventures that are not wrecks!” Densher in short was willing, but he came back to his point. “What I mean is that she has none of the effect—on one’s nerves or whatever—of an invalid.”

Kate on her side did this justice. “No—that’s the beauty of her.”

“The beauty-?”

“Yes, she’s so wonderful. She won’t show for that, any more than your watch, when it’s about to stop for want of being wound up, gives you convenient notice or shows as different from usual. She won’t die, she won’t live, by inches. She won’t smell, as it were, of drugs. She won’t taste, as it were, of medicine. No one will know.”

“Then what,” he demanded, frankly mystified now, “are we talking about? In what extraordinary state is she?”

Kate went on as if, at this, making it out in a fashion for herself. “I believe that if she’s ill at all she’s very ill. I believe that if she’s bad she’s not a *little* bad. I can’t tell you why, but that’s how I see her. She’ll really live or she’ll really not. She’ll have it all or she’ll miss it all. Now I don’t think she’ll have it all.”

Densher had followed this with his eyes upon her, her own having thoughtfully wandered, and as if it were more impressive than + + cid. “You ‘think’ and you ‘don’t think,’ and yet you remain all the while without an inkling of her complaint?”

“No, not without an inkling; but it’s a matter in which I don’t want knowledge. She moreover herself doesn’t want one to want it: she has, as to what may be preying upon her, a kind of ferocity of modesty, a kind of—I don’t know what to call it—intensity of pride. And then and then—” But with this she faltered.

“And then what?”

“I’m a brute about illness. I hate it. It’s well for you, my dear,” Kate continued, “that you’re as sound as a bell.”

“Thank you!” Densher laughed. “It’s rather good then for yourself too that you’re as strong as the sea.”

She looked at him now a moment as for the selfish gladness of their young immunities. It was all they had together, but they had it at least without a flaw—each had the beauty, the physical felicity, the personal virtue, love and desire of the other. Yet it was as if that very consciousness threw them back the next moment into pity for the poor girl who had everything else in the world, the great genial good they, alas, didn’t have, but failed on the other hand of this. “How we’re talking about her!” Kate compunctiously sighed. But there were the facts. “From illness I keep away.”

“But you don’t—since here you are, in spite of all you say, in the midst of it.”

“Ah I’m only watching—!”

“And putting me forward in your place? Thank you!”

“Oh,” said Kate, “I’m breaking you in. Let it give you the measure of what I shall expect of you. One can’t begin too soon.”

She drew away, as from the impression of a stir on the balcony, the hand of which he had a minute before possessed himself; and the warning brought him back to attention. “You haven’t even an idea if it’s a case for surgery?”

“I dare say it may be; that is that if it comes to anything it may come to that. Of course she’s in the highest hands.”

“The doctors are after her then?”

“She’s after *them*—it’s the same thing. I think I’m free to say it now—she sees Sir Luke Strett.”

It made him quickly wince. “Ah fifty thousand knives!” Then after an instant: “One seems to guess.”

Yes, but she waved it away. “Don’t guess. Only do as I tell you.”

For a moment now, in silence, he took it all in, might have had it before him. “What you want of me then is to make up to a sick girl.”

“Ah but you admit yourself that she doesn’t affect you as sick. You understand moreover just how much—and just how little.”

“It’s amazing,” he presently answered, “what you think I understand.”

“Well, if you’ve brought me to it, my dear,” she returned, “that has been your way of breaking *me* in. Besides which, so far as making up to her goes, plenty of others will.”

Densher for a little, under this suggestion, might have been seeing their young friend on a pile of cushions and in a perpetual tea-gown, amid flowers and with drawn blinds, surrounded by the higher nobility. “Others can follow their tastes. Besides, others are free.”

“But so are you, my dear!”

She had spoken with impatience, and her suddenly quitting him had sharpened it; in spite of which he kept his place, only looking up at her. “You’re prodigious!”

“Of course I’m prodigious!”—and, as immediately happened, she gave a further sign of it that he fairly sat watching. The door from the lobby had, as she spoke, been thrown open for a gentleman who, immediately finding her within his view, advanced to greet her before the announcement of his name could reach her companion. Densher none the less felt himself brought quickly into relation; Kate’s welcome to the visitor became almost precipitately an appeal to her friend, who slowly rose to meet it. “I don’t know whether you know Lord Mark.” And then for the other party: “Mr. Merton Densher—who has just come back from America.”

“Oh!” said the other party while Densher said nothing—occupied as he mainly was on the spot with weighing the sound in question. He recognised it in a moment as less imponderable than it might have appeared, as having indeed positive claims. It wasn’t, that is, he knew, the “Oh!” of the idiot, however great the superficial resemblance: it was that of the clever, the accomplished man; it was the very specialty of the speaker, and a deal of expensive training and experience had gone to producing it. Densher felt somehow that, as a thing of value accidentally picked up, it would retain an interest of curiosity. The three stood for a little together in an awkwardness to which he was conscious of contributing his share; Kate failing to ask Lord Mark to be seated, but letting him know that he would find Mrs. Lowder, with some others, on the balcony.

“Oh and Miss Theale I suppose?—as I seemed to hear outside, from below, Mrs. Stringham’s unmistakeable voice.”

“Yes, but Mrs. Stringham’s alone. Milly’s unwell,” the girl explained, “and was compelled to disappoint us.”

“Ah ‘disappoint’—rather!” And, lingering a little, he kept his eyes on Densher. “She isn’t really bad, I trust?”

Densher, after all he had heard, easily supposed him interested in Milly; but he could imagine him also interested in the young man with whom he had found Kate engaged and whom he yet considered without visible intelligence. That young man concluded in a moment that he was doing what he wanted, satisfying himself as to each. To this he was aided by Kate, who produced a prompt: “Oh dear no; I think not. I’ve just been reassuring Mr. Densher,” she added—“who’s as concerned as the rest of us. I’ve been calming his fears.”

“Oh!” said Lord Mark again—and again it was just as good. That was for Densher, the latter could see, or think he saw. And then for the others: “My fears would want calming. We must take great care of her. This way?”

She went with him a few steps, and while Densher, hanging about, gave them frank attention, presently paused again for some further colloquy. What passed between them their observer lost, but she was presently with him again, Lord Mark joining the rest. Densher was by this time quite ready for her. “It’s he who’s your aunt’s man?”

“Oh immensely.”

“I mean for *you.”*

“That’s what I mean too,” Kate smiled. “There he is. Now you can judge.”

“Judge of what?”

“Judge of him.”

“Why should I judge of him?” Densher asked. “I’ve nothing to do with him.”

“Then why do you ask about him?”

“To judge of you—which is different.”

Kate seemed for a little to look at the difference. “To take the measure, do you mean, of my danger?”

He hesitated; then he said: “I’m thinking, I dare say, of Miss Theale’s. How does your aunt reconcile his interest in her—?”

“With his interest in me?”

“With her own interest in you,” Densher said while she reflected. “If that interest—Mrs. Lowder’s—takes the form of Lord Mark, hasn’t he rather to look out for the forms *he* takes?”

Kate seemed interested in the question, but “Oh he takes them easily,” she answered. “The beauty is that she doesn’t trust him. ”

“That Milly doesn’t?”

“Yes—Milly either. But I mean Aunt Maud. Not really.”

Densher gave it his wonder. “Takes him to her heart and yet thinks he cheats?”

“Yes,” said Kate—“that’s the way people are. What they think of their enemies, goodness knows, is bad enough; but I’m still more struck with what they think of their friends. Milly’s own state of mind, however,” she went on, “is lucky. That’s Aunt Maud’s security, though she doesn’t yet fully recognise it—besides being Milly’s own.”

“You conceive it a real escape then not to care for him?”

She shook her head in beautiful grave deprecation. “You oughtn’t to make me say too much. But I’m glad I don’t.”

“Don’t say too much?”

“Don’t care for Lord Mark.”

“Oh!” Densher answered with a sound like his lordship’s own. To which he added: “You absolutely hold that that poor girl doesn’t?”

“Ah you know what I hold about that poor girl!” It had made her again impatient.

Yet he stuck a minute to the subject. “You scarcely call him, I suppose, one of the dukes.”

“Mercy, no—far from it. He’s not, compared with other possibilities, ‘in’ it. Milly, it’s true,” she said, to be exact, “has no natural sense of social values, doesn’t in the least understand our differences or know who’s who or what’s what.”

“I see. That,” Densher laughed, “is her reason for liking me.”

“Precisely. She doesn’t resemble me,” said Kate, “who at least know what I lose.”

Well, it had all risen for Densher to a considerable interest. “And Aunt Maud—why shouldn’t *she* know? I mean that your friend there isn’t really anything. Does she suppose him of ducal value?”

“Scarcely; save in the sense of being uncle to a duke. That’s undeniably something. He’s the best moreover we can get.”

“Oh, oh!” said Densher; and his doubt was not all derisive.

“It isn’t Lord Mark’s grandeur,” she went on without heeding this; “because perhaps in the line of that alone—as he has no money—more could be done. But she’s not a bit sordid; she only counts with the sordidness of others. Besides, he’s grand enough, with a duke in his family and at the other end of the string. *The* thing’s his genius.”

“And do you believe in that?”

“In Lord Mark’s genius?” Kate, as if for a more final opinion than had yet been asked of her, took a moment to think. She balanced indeed so that one would scarce have known what to expect; but she came out in time with a very sufficient “Yes!”

“Political?”

“Universal. I don’t know at least,” she said, “what else to call it when a man’s able to make himself without effort, without violence, without machinery of any sort, so intensely felt. He has somehow an effect without his being in any traceable way a cause.”

“Ah but if the effect,” said Densher with conscious superficiality, “isn’t agreeable—?”

“Oh but it is!”

“Not surely for every one.”

“If you mean not for you,” Kate returned, “you may have reasons—and men don’t count. Women don’t know if it’s agreeable or not.”

“Then there you are!”

“Yes, precisely—that takes, on his part, genius.”

Densher stood before her as if he wondered what everything she thus promptly, easily and above all amusingly met him with, would have been found, should it have come to an analysis, to “take.” Something suddenly, as if under a last determinant touch, welled up in him and overflowed—the sense of his good fortune and her variety, of the future she promised, the interest she supplied. “All women but you are stupid. How can I look at another? You’re different and different—and then you’re different again. No marvel Aunt Maud builds on you—except that you’re so much too good for what she builds for. Even ‘society’ won’t know how good for it you are; it’s too stupid, and you’re beyond it. You’d have to pull it uphill—it’s you yourself who are at the top. The women one meets—what are they but books one has already read? You’re a whole library of the unknown, the uncut.” He almost moaned, he ached, from the depth of his content. “Upon my word I’ve a subscription!”

She took it from him with her face again giving out all it had in answer, and they remained once more confronted and united in their essential wealth of life. “It’s you who draw me out. I exist in you. Not in others.”

It had been, however, as if the thrill of their association itself pressed in him, as great felicities do, the sharp spring of fear. “See here, you know: don‘t, *don’t—”*

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t fail me. It would kill me.”

She looked at him a minute with no response but her eyes. “So you think you’ll kill *me* in time to prevent it?” She smiled, but he saw her the next instant as smiling through tears; and the instant after this she had got, in respect to the particular point, quite off. She had come back to another, which was one of her own; her own were so closely connected that Densher’s were at best but parenthetic. Still she had a distance to go. “You do

then see your way?" She put it to him before they joined—as was high time-the others. And she made him understand she meant his way with Milly.

He had dropped a little in presence of the explanation; then she had brought him up to a sort of recognition. He could make out by this light something of what he saw, but a dimness also there was, undispelled since his return. "There's something you must definitely tell me. If our friend knows that all the while—?"

She came straight to his aid, formulating for him his anxiety, though quite to smooth it down. "All the while she and I here were growing intimate, you and I were in unmentioned relation? If she knows that, yes, she knows our relation must have involved your writing to me."

"Then how could she suppose you weren't answering?"

"She doesn't suppose it."

"How then can she imagine you never named her?"

"She doesn't. She knows now I did name her. I've told her everything. She's in possession of reasons that will perfectly do."

Still he just brooded. "She takes things from you exactly as I take them?"

"Exactly as you take them."

"She's just such another victim?"

"Just such another. You're a pair."

"Then if anything happens," said Densher, "we can console each other?"

"Ah something *may* indeed happen," she returned, "if you'll only go straight!"

He watched the others an instant through the window. "What do you mean by going straight?"

"Not worrying. Doing as you like. Try, as I've told you before, and you'll see. You'll have me perfectly, always, to refer to."

"Oh rather, I hope! But if she's going away?"

It pulled Kate up but a moment. "I'll bring her back. There you are. You won't be able to say I haven't made it smooth for you."

He faced it all, and certainly it was queer. But it wasn't the queerness that after another minute was uppermost. He was in a wondrous silken web, and it was amusing. "You spoil me!"

He wasn't sure if Mrs. Lowder, who at this juncture reappeared, had caught his word as it dropped from him; probably not, he thought, her attention being given to Mrs. Stringham, with whom she came through and who was now, none too soon, taking leave of her. They were followed by Lord Mark and by the other men, but two or three things happened before any dispersal of the company began. One of these was that Kate found time to say to him with furtive emphasis: "You must go now!" Another was that she next addressed herself in all frankness to Lord Mark, drew near to him with an almost reproachful "Come and talk to *me!"*—a challenge resulting after a minute for Densher in a consciousness of their installation together in an out-of-the-way corner, though not the same he himself had just occupied with her. Still another was that Mrs. Stringham, in the random intensity of her farewells, affected him as looking at him with a small grave intimation, something into which he afterwards read the meaning that if he had happened to desire a few words with her after dinner he would have found her ready. This impression was naturally light, but it just left him with the sense of something by his own act overlooked, unappreciated. It gathered perhaps a slightly sharper shade from the mild formality of her "Good-night, sir!" as she passed him; a matter as to which there was now nothing more to be done, thanks to the alertness of the young man he by this time had appraised as even more harmless than himself. This personage had forestalled him in opening the door for her and was evidently—with a view, Densher might have judged, to ulterior designs on Milly—proposing to attend her to her carriage. What further occurred was that Aunt Maud, having released her, immediately had a word for himself. It was an imperative "Wait a minute," by which she both detained and dismissed him; she was particular about her minute, but he hadn't yet given her, as happened, a sign of withdrawal.

"Return to our little friend. You'll find her really interesting."

"If you mean Miss Theale," he said, "I shall certainly not forget her. But you must remember that, so far as her 'interest' is concerned, I myself discovered, I—as was said at dinner—invented her."

"Well, one seemed rather to gather that you hadn't taken out the patent. Don't, I only mean, in the press of

other things, too much neglect her."

Affected, surprised by the coincidence of her appeal with Kate's, he asked himself quickly if it mightn't help him with her. He at any rate could but try. "You're all looking after my manners. That's exactly, you know, what Miss Croy has been saying to me. *She* keeps me up—she has had so much to say about them."

He found pleasure in being able to give his hostess an account of his passage with Kate that, while quite veracious, might be reassuring to herself. But Aunt Maud, wonderfully and facing him straight, took it as if her confidence were supplied with other props. If she saw his intention in it she yet blinked neither with doubt nor with acceptance; she only said imperturbably: "Yes, she'll herself do anything for her friend; so that she but preaches what she practises."

Densher really quite wondered if Aunt Maud knew how far Kate's devotion went. He was moreover a little puzzled by this special harmony; in face of which he quickly asked himself if Mrs. Lowder had bethought herself of the American girl as a distraction for him, and if Kate's mastery of the subject were therefore but an appearance addressed to her aunt. What might really *become* in all this of the American girl was therefore a question that, on the latter contingency, would lose none of its sharpness. However, questions could wait, and it was easy, so far as he understood, to meet Mrs. Lowder. "It isn't a bit, all the same, you know, that I resist. I find Miss Theale charming."

Well, it was all she wanted. "Then don't miss a chance."

"The only thing is," he went on, "that she's—naturally now-leaving town and, as I take it, going abroad."

Aunt Maud looked indeed an instant as if she herself had been dealing with this difficulty. "She won't go," she smiled in spite of it, "till she has seen you. Moreover, when she does go—" She paused, leaving him uncertain. But the next minute he was still more at sea. "We shall go too."

He gave a smile that he himself took for slightly strange. "And what good will that do *me?"*

"We shall be near them somewhere, and you'll come out to us."

"Oh!" he said a little awkwardly.

"I'll see that you do. I mean I'll write to you."

"Ah thank you, thank you!" Merton Densher laughed. She was indeed putting him on his honour, and his honour winced a little at the use he rather helplessly saw himself suffering her to believe she could make of it. "There are all sorts of things," he vaguely remarked, "to consider."

"No doubt. But there's above all the great thing."

"And pray what's that?"

"Why the importance of your not losing the occasion of your life. I'm treating you handsomely, I'm looking after it for you. I *can*— I can smooth your path. She's charming, she's clever and she's good. And her fortune's a real fortune."

Ah there she was, Aunt Maud! The pieces fell together for him as he felt her thus buying him off, and buying him—it would have been funny if it hadn't been so grave—with Miss Theale's money. He ventured, derisive, fairly to treat it as extravagant. "I'm much obliged to you for the handsome offer—"

"Of what doesn't belong to me?" She wasn't abashed. "I don't say it does—but there's no reason it shouldn't to you. Mind you, moreover"—she kept it up—"I'm not one who talks in the air. And you owe me something—if you want to know why."

Distinct he felt her pressure; he felt, given her basis, her consistency; he even felt, to a degree that was immediately to receive an odd confirmation, her truth. Her truth, for that matter, was that she believed him bribeable: a belief that for his own mind as well, while they stood there, lighted up the impossible. What then in this light did Kate believe him? But that wasn't what he asked aloud. "Of course I know I owe you thanks for a deal of kind treatment. Your inviting me for instance to-night—!"

"Yes, my inviting you to-night's a part of it. But you don't know," she added, "how far I've gone for you."

He felt himself red and as if his honour were colouring up; but he laughed again as he could. "I see how far you're going."

"I'm the most honest woman in the world, but I've nevertheless done for you what was necessary." And then as her now quite sombre gravity only made him stare: "To start you it was necessary. From me it has the weight." He but continued to stare, and she met his blankness with surprise. "Don't you understand me? I've told the proper lie for you." Still he only showed her his flushed strained smile; in spite of which, speaking

with force and as if he must with a minute's reflexion see what she meant, she turned away from him. "I depend upon you now to make me right!"

The minute's reflexion he was of course more free to take after he had left the house. He walked up the Bayswater Road, but he stopped short, under the murky stars, before the modern church, in the middle of the square that, going eastward, opened out on his left. He had had his brief stupidity, but now he understood. She had guaranteed to Milly Theale through Mrs. Stringham that Kate didn't care for him. She had affirmed through the same source that the attachment was only his. He made it out, he made it out, and he could see what she meant by its starting him. She had described Kate as merely compassionate, so that Milly might be compassionate too. "Proper" indeed it was, her lie—the very properest possible and the most deeply, richly diplomatic. So Milly was successfully deceived.

—V—

To see her alone, the poor girl, he none the less promptly felt, was to see her after all very much on the old basis, the basis of his three visits in New York; the new element, when once he was again face to face with her, not really amounting to much more than a recognition, with a little surprise, of the positive extent of the old basis. Everything but that, everything embarrassing fell way after he had been present five minutes: it was in fact wonderful that their excellent, their pleasant, their permitted and proper and harmless American relation—the legitimacy of which he could thus scarce express in names enough—should seem so unperturbed by other matters. They had both since then had great adventures—such an adventure for him was his mental annexation of her country; and it was now, for the moment, as if the greatest of them all were this acquired consciousness of reasons other than those that had already served. Densher had asked for her, at her hotel, the day after Aunt Maud's dinner, with a rich, that is with a highly troubled, preconception of the part likely to be played for him at present, in any contact with her, by Kate's and Mrs. Lowder's so oddly conjoined and so really superfluous attempts to make her interesting. She had been interesting enough without them—that appeared to-day to come back to him; and, admirable and beautiful as was the charitable zeal of the two ladies, it might easily have nipped in the bud the germs of a friendship inevitably limited but still perfectly open to him. What had happily averted the need of his breaking off, what would as happily continue to avert it, was his own good sense and good humour, a certain spring of mind in him which ministered, imagination aiding, to understandings and allowances and which he had positively never felt such ground as just now to rejoice in the possession of. Many men—he practically made the reflexion—wouldn't have taken the matter that way, would have lost patience, finding the appeal in question irrational, exorbitant; and, thereby making short work with it, would have let it render any further acquaintance with Miss Theale impossible. He had talked with Kate of this young woman's being "sacrificed," and that would have been one way, so far as he was concerned, to sacrifice her. Such, however, had not been the tune to which his at first bewildered view had, since the night before, cleared itself up. It wasn't so much that he failed of being the kind of man who "chucked," for he knew himself as the kind of man wise enough to mark the case in which chucking might be the minor evil and the least cruelty. It was that he liked too much every one concerned willingly to show himself merely impracticable. He liked Kate, goodness knew, and he also clearly enough liked Mrs. Lowder. He liked in particular Milly herself; and hadn't it come up for him the evening before that he quite liked even Susan Shepherd? He had never known himself so generally merciful. It was a footing, at all events, whatever accounted for it, on which he should surely be rather a muff not to manage by one turn or another to escape disobliging. Should he find he couldn't work it there would still be time enough. The idea of working it crystallized before him in such guise as not only to promise much interest—fairly, in case of success, much enthusiasm; but positively to impart to failure an appearance of barbarity.

Arriving thus in Brook Street both with the best intentions and with a margin consciously left for some primary awkwardness, he found his burden, to his great relief, unexpectedly light. The awkwardness involved in the responsibility so newly and so ingeniously traced for him turned round on the spot to present him another face. This was simply the face of his old impression, which he now fully recovered—the impression that American girls, when, rare case, they had the attraction of Milly, were clearly the easiest people in the world. Had what had happened been that this specimen of the class was from the first so committed to ease that nothing subsequent *could* ever make her difficult? That affected him now as still more probable than on the occasion of the hour or two lately passed with her in Kate's society. Milly Theale had recognized no complication, to Densher's view, while bringing him, with his companion, from the National Gallery and entertaining them at luncheon; it was therefore scarce supposable that complications had become so soon too much for her. His pretext for presenting himself was fortunately of the best and simplest; the least he could decently do, given their happy acquaintance, was to call with an enquiry after learning that she had been prevented by illness from meeting him at dinner. And then there was the beautiful accident of her other

demonstration; he must at any rate have given a sign as a sequel to the hospitality he had shared with Kate. Well, he was giving one now—such as it was; he was finding her, to begin with, accessible, and very naturally and prettily glad to see him. He had come, after luncheon, early, though not so early but that she might already be out if she were well enough; and she was well enough and yet was still at home. He had an inner glimpse, with this, of the comment Kate would have made on it; it wasn't absent from his thought that Milly would have been at home by her account because expecting, after a talk with Mrs. Stringham, that a certain person might turn up. He even—so pleasantly did things go—enjoyed freedom of mind to welcome, on that supposition, a fresh sign of the beautiful hypocrisy of women. He went so far as to enjoy believing the girl *might* have stayed in for him; it helped him to enjoy her behaving as if she hadn't. She expressed, that is, exactly the right degree of surprise; she didn't a bit overdo it: the lesson of which was, perceptibly, that, so far as his late lights had opened the door to any want of the natural in their meetings, he might trust her to take care of it for him as well as for herself.

She had begun this, admirably, on his entrance, with her turning away from the table at which she had apparently been engaged in letter-writing; it was the very possibility of his betraying a concern for her as one of the afflicted that she had within the first minute conjured way. She was never, never—did he understand?—to be one of the afflicted for him; and the manner in which he understood it, something of the answering pleasure that he couldn't help knowing he showed, constituted, he was very soon after to acknowledge, something like a start for intimacy.

When things like that could pass people had in truth to be equally conscious of a relation. It soon made one, at all events, when it didn't find one made. She had let him ask—there had been time for that, his allusion to her friend's explanatory arrival at Lancaster Gate without her being inevitable; but she had blown away, and quite as much with the look in her eyes as with the smile on her lips, every ground for anxiety and every chance for insistence. How was she?—why she was as he thus saw her and as she had reasons of her own, nobody else's business, for desiring to appear. Kate's account of her as too proud for pity, as fiercely shy about so personal a secret, came back to him; so that he rejoiced he could take a hint, especially when he wanted to. The question the girl had quickly disposed of—"Oh it was nothing: I'm all right, thank you!"—was one he was glad enough to be able to banish. It wasn't at all, in spite of the appeal Kate had made to him on it, his affair; for his interest had been invoked in the name of compassion, and the name of compassion was exactly what he felt himself at the end of two minutes forbidden so much as to whisper. He had been sent to see her in order to be sorry for her, and how sorry he might be, quite privately, he was yet to make out. Didn't that signify, however, almost not at all?—inasmuch as, whatever his upshot, he was never to give her a glimpse of it. Thus the ground was unexpectedly cleared; though it was not till a slightly longer time had passed that he read clear, at first with amusement and then with a strange shade of respect, what had most operated. Extraordinarily, quite amazingly, he began to see that if his pity hadn't had to yield to still other things it would have had to yield quite definitely to her own. That was the way the case had turned round: he had made his visit to be sorry for her, but he would repeat it—if he did repeat it—in order that she might be sorry for him. His situation made him, she judged—when once one liked him—a subject for that degree of tenderness: he felt this judgement in her, and felt it as something he should really, in decency, in dignity, in common honesty, have very soon to reckon with.

Odd enough was it certainly that the question originally before him, the question placed there by Kate, should so of a sudden find itself quite dislodged by another. This other, it was easy to see, came straight up with the fact of her beautiful delusion and her wasted charity; the whole thing preparing for him as pretty a case of conscience as he could have desired, and one at the prospect of which he was already wincing. If he was interesting it was because he was unhappy; and if he was unhappy it was because his passion for Kate had spent itself in vain; and if Kate was indifferent, inexorable, it was because she had left Milly in no doubt of it. That above all was what came up for him—how clear an impression of this attitude, how definite an account of his own failure, Kate must have given her friend. His immediate quarter of an hour there with the girl lighted up for him almost luridly such an inference; it was almost as if the other party to their remarkable understanding had been with them as they talked, had been hovering about, had dropped in to look after her work. The value of the work affected him as different from the moment he saw it so expressed in poor Milly. Since it was false that he wasn't loved, so his right was quite quenched to figure on that ground as important; and if he didn't look out he should find himself appreciating in a way quite at odds with straightness the good faith of Milly's benevolence. *There* was the place for scruples; there the need absolutely to mind what he was about. If it wasn't proper for him to enjoy consideration on a perfectly false footing, where was the guarantee that, if he kept on, he mightn't soon himself pretend to the grievance in order not to miss the sweet? Consideration—from a charming girl—was soothing on whatever theory; and it didn't take him far to remember that he had himself as yet done nothing deceptive. It was Kate's description of him, his defeated state, it was none of his own; his responsibility would begin, as he might say, only with acting it out. The sharp point was, however, in the difference between acting and not acting: this difference in fact it was that made the case of conscience. He saw it with a certain alarm rise before him that everything was acting that was not speaking the particular word. "If you like me because you think *she* doesn't, it isn't a bit true: she *does*

like me awfully!"—that would have been the particular word; which there were at the same time but too palpably such difficulties about his uttering. Wouldn't it be virtually as indelicate to challenge her as to leave her deluded?—and this quite apart from the exposure, so to speak, of Kate, as to whom it would constitute a kind of betrayal. Kate's design was something so extraordinarily special to Kate that he felt himself shrink from the complications involved in judging it. Not to give away the woman one loved, but to back her up in her mistakes—once they had gone a certain length—that was perhaps chief among the inevitabilities of the abjection of love. Loyalty was of course supremely prescribed in presence of any design on her part, however roundabout, to do one nothing but good.

Densher had quite to steady himself not to be awestruck at the immensity of the good his own friend must on all this evidence have wanted to do him. Of one thing indeed meanwhile he was sure: Milly Theale wouldn't herself precipitate his necessity of intervention. She would absolutely never say to him: *"Is* it so impossible she shall ever care for you seriously?"—without which nothing could well be less delicate than for him aggressively to set her right. Kate would be free to do that if Kate, in some prudence, some contrition, for some better reason in fine, should revise her plan; but he asked himself what, failing this, *he* could do that wouldn't be after all more gross than dong nothing. This brought him round again to the acceptance of the fact that the poor girl liked him. She put it, for reasons of her own, on a simple, a beautiful ground, a ground that already supplied her with the pretext she required. The ground was there, that is, in the impression she had received, retained, cherished; the pretext, over and above it, was the pretext for acting on it. That she now believed as she did made her sure at last that she might act; so that what Densher therefore would have struck at would be the root, in her soul, of a pure pleasure. It positively lifted its head and flowered, this pure pleasure, while the young man now sat with her, and there were things she seemed to say that took the words out of his mouth. These were not all the things she did say; they were rather what such things meant in the light of what he knew. Her warning him for instance off the question of how she was, the quick brave little art with which she did that, represented to his fancy a truth she didn't utter. "I'm well for *you*—that's all you have to do with or need trouble about: I shall never be anything so horrid as ill for you. So there you are; worry about me, spare me, please, as little as you can. Don't be afraid, in short, to ignore my 'interesting' side. It isn't, you see, even now while you sit here, that there aren't lots of others. Only do *them* justice and we shall get on beautifully." This was what was folded finely up in her talk—all quite ostensibly about her impressions and her intentions. She tried to put Densher again on his American doings, but he wouldn't have that today. As he thought of the way in which, the other afternoon, before Kate, he had sat complacently "jawing," he accused himself of excess, of having overdone it, having made—at least apparently—more of a "set" at their entertainer than he was at all events than intending. He turned the tables, drawing her out about London, about her vision of life there, and only too glad to treat her as a person with whom he could easily have other topics than her aches and pains. He spoke to her above all the evidence offered him at Lancaster Gate that she had come but to conquer; and when she had met this with full and gay assent—"How could I help being the feature of the season, the what-do-you-call-it, the theme of every tongue?"—they fraternized freely over all that had come and gone for each since their interrupted encounter in New York.

At the same time, while many things in quick succession came up for them, came up in particular for Densher, nothing perhaps was just so sharp as the odd influence of their present conditions on their view of their past ones. It was as if they hadn't known how "thick" they had originally become, as if, in a manner, they had really fallen to remembrance of more passages of intimacy than there had in fact at the time quite been room for. They were in a relation now so complicated, whether by what they said or by what they didn't say, that it might have been seeking to justify its speedy growth by reaching back to one of those fabulous periods in which prosperous states place their beginnings. He recalled what had been said at Mrs. Lowder's about the steps and stages, in people's careers, that absence caused one to miss, and about the resulting frequent sense of meeting them further on; which, with some other matters also recalled, he took occasion to communicate to Milly. The matters he couldn't mention mingled themselves with those he did; so that it would doubtless have been hard to say which of the two groups now played most of a part. He was kept face to face with this young lady by a force absolutely resident in their situation and operating, for his nerves, with the swiftness of the forces commonly regarded by sensitive persons as beyond their control. The current thus determined had positively become for him, by the time he had been ten minutes in the room, something that, but for the absurdity of comparing the very small with the very great, he would freely have likened to the rapids of Niagara. An uncriticized acquaintance between a clever young man and a responsive young woman could do nothing more, at the most, than go, and his actual experiment went and went and went. Nothing probably so conduced to make it go as the marked circumstance that they had spoken all the while not a word about Kate; and this in spite of the fact that, if it were a question for them of what had occurred in the past weeks, nothing had occurred comparable to Kate's predominance. Densher had but the night before appealed to her for instruction as to what he must do about her, but he fairly winced to find how little this came to. She had foretold him of course how little; but it was a truth that looked different when shown him by Milly. It proved to him that the latter had in fact been dealt with, but it produced in him the thought that Kate might perhaps again conveniently be questioned. He would have liked to speak to her before going further—to make

sure she really meant him to succeed quite so much. With all the difference that, as we say, came up for him, it came up afresh, naturally, that he might make his visit brief and never renew it; yet the strangest thing of all was that the argument against that issue would have sprung precisely from the beautiful little eloquence involved in Milly's avoidances.

Precipitate these well might be, since they emphasized the fact that she was proceeding in the sense of the assurances she had taken. Over the latter she had visibly not hesitated, for hadn't they had the merit of giving her a chance? Densher quite saw her, felt her take it; the chance, neither more nor less, of help rendered him according to her freedom. It was what Kate had left her with: "Listen to him, *I?* Never! So do as you like." What Milly "liked" was to do, it thus appeared, as she was doing: our young man's glimpse of which was just what would have been for him not less a glimpse of the peculiar brutality of shaking her off. The choice exhaled its shy fragrance of heroism, for it was not aided by any question of parting with Kate. She would be charming to Kate as well as to Kate's adorer; she would incur whatever pain could dwell for her in the sight—should she continue to be exposed to the sight—of the adorer thrown with the adored. It wouldn't really have taken much more to make him wonder if he hadn't before him one of those rare case of exaltation—food for fiction, food for poetry—in which a man's fortune with the woman who doesn't care for him is positively promoted by the woman who does. It was as if Milly had said to herself: "Well, he can at least meet her in my society, if that's anything to him; so that my line can only be to make my society attractive." She certainly couldn't have made a different impression if she *had* so reasoned. All of which, none the less, didn't prevent his soon enough saying to her, quite as if she were to be whirled into space: "And now, then, what becomes of you? Do you begin to rush about on visits to country-houses?"

She disowned the idea with a headshake that, put on what face she would, couldn't help betraying to him something of her suppressed view of the possibility—ever, ever perhaps—of any such proceedings. They weren't at any rate for her now. "Dear no. We go abroad for a few weeks somewhere of high air. That has been before us for many days; we've only been kept on by last necessities here. However, everything's done and the wind's in our sails."

"May you scud then happily before it! But when," he asked, "do you come back?"

She looked ever so vague; then as if to correct it: "Oh when the wind turns. And what do you do with your summer?"

"Ah I spend it in sordid toil. I drench it with mercenary ink. My work in your country counts for play as well. You see what's thought of the pleasure your country can give. My holiday's over."

"I'm sorry you had to take it," said Milly, "at such a different time from ours. If you could but have worked while we've been working—"

"I might be playing while you play? Oh the distinction isn't so great with me. There's a little of each for me, of work and of play, in either. But you and Mrs. Stringham, with Miss Croy and Mrs. Lowder—you all," he went on, "have been given up, like navvies or niggers, to real physical toil. Your rest is something you've earned and you need. My labour's comparatively light."

"Very true," she smiled; "but all the same I like mine."

"It doesn't leave you 'done'?"

"Not a bit. I don't get tired when I'm interested. Oh I could go far."

He bethought himself. "Then why don't you?—since you've got here, as I learn, the whole place in your pocket."

"Well, it's a kind of economy—I'm saving things up. I've enjoyed so what you speak of—though your account of it's fantastic—that I'm watching over its future, that I can't help being anxious and careful. I want—in the interest itself of what I've had and may still have—not to make stupid mistakes. The way not to make them is to get off again to a distance and see the situation from there. I shall keep it fresh," she wound up as if herself rather pleased with the ingenuity of her statement—"I shall keep it fresh, by that prudence, for my return."

"Ah then you *will* return? Can you promise one that?"

Her face fairly lighted at his asking for a promise; but she made as if bargaining a little. "Isn't London rather awful in winter?"

He had been going to ask her if she meant for the invalid; but he checked the infelicity of this and took the enquiry as referring to social life. "No—I like it, with one thing and another; it's less of a mob than later on; and it would have for *us* the merit—should you come here then—that we should probably see more of you. So do reappear for us—if it isn't a question of climate."

She looked at that a little graver. “If what isn’t a question—?”

“Why the determination of your movements. You spoke just now of going somewhere for that.”

“For better air?”—she remembered. “Oh yes, one certainly wants to get out of London in August.”

“Rather, of course!”—he fully understood. “Though I’m glad you’ve hung on long enough for me to catch you. Try us at any rate,” he continued, “once more.”

“Whom do you mean by ‘us’?” she presently asked.

It pulled him up an instant—representing, as he saw it might have seemed, an allusion to himself as conjoined with Kate, whom he was proposing not to mention any more than his hostess did. But the issue was easy. “I mean all of us together, every one you’ll find ready to surround you with sympathy.”

It made her, none the less, in her odd charming way, challenge him afresh. “Why do you say sympathy?”

“Well, it’s doubtless a pale word. What we *shall* feel for you will be much nearer worship.”

“As near then as you like!” With which at last Kate’s name was sounded. “The people I’d most come back for are the people you know. I’d do it for Mrs. Lowder, who has been beautifully kind to me.”

“So she has to *me,”* said Densher. “I feel,” he added as she at first answered nothing, “that, quite contrary to anything I originally expected, I’ve made a good friend of her.”

“*I* didn’t expect it either—its turning out as it has. But I did,” said Milly, “with Kate. I shall come back for her too. I’d do anything—she kept it up—“for Kate”.

Looking at him as with conscious clearness while she spoke, she might for the moment have effectively laid a trap for whatever remains of the ideal straightness in him were still able to pull themselves together and operate. He was afterwards to say to himself that something had at that moment hung for him by a hair. “Oh I know what one would do for Kate!”—it had hung for him by a hair to break out with that, which he felt he had really been kept from by an element in his consciousness stronger still. The proof of the truth in question was precisely in his silence; resisting the impulse to break out was what he *was* doing for Kate. This at the time moreover came and went quickly enough; he was trying the next minute but to make Milly’s allusion easy for herself. “Of course I know what friends you are—and of course I understand,” he permitted himself to add, “any amount of devotion to a person so charming. That’s the good turn then she’ll do us all—I mean her working for your return.”

“Oh you don’t know,” said Milly, “how much I’m really on her hands.”

He could but accept the appearance of wondering how much he might show he knew. “Ah she’s very masterful.”

“She’s great. Yet I don’t say she bullies me.”

“No—that’s not the way. At any rate it isn’t hers,” he smiled. He remembered, however, then that an undue acquaintance with Kate’s ways was just what he mustn’t show; and he pursued the subject no further than to remark with a good intention that had the further merit of representing a truth: “I don’t feel as if I knew her—really to call know.”

“Well, if you come to that, I don’t either!” she laughed. The words gave him, as soon as they were uttered, a sense of responsibility for his own; though during a silence that ensued for a minute he had time to recognize that his own contained after all no element of falsity. Strange enough therefore was it that he could go too far—if it *was* too far—without being false. His observation was one he would perfectly have made to Kate herself. And before he again spoke, and before Milly did, he took time for more still—for feeling how just here it was that he must break short off if his mind was really made up not to go further. It was as if he had been at a corner—and fairly put there by his last speech; so that it depended on him whether or no to turn it. The silence, if prolonged but an instant, might even have given him a sense of her waiting to see what he would do. It was filled for them the next thing by the sound, rather voluminous for the August afternoon, of the approach, in the street below them, of heavy carriage-wheels and of horses trained to “step.” A rumble, a great shake, a considerable effective clatter, had been apparently succeeded by a pause at the door of the hotel, which was in turn accompanied by a due display of diminished prancing and stamping. “You’ve a visitor,” Densher laughed, “and it must be at least an ambassador.”

“It’s only my own carriage; it does that—isn’t it wonderful?—every day. But we find it, Mrs. Stringham and I, in the innocence of our hearts, very amusing.” She had got up, as she spoke, to assure herself of what she said; and at the end of a few steps they were together on the balcony and looking down at her waiting chariot, which made indeed a brave show. “Is it very awful?”

It was to Densher's eyes—save for its absurd heaviness—only pleasantly pompous. "It seems to me delightfully rococo. But how do I know? You're mistress of these things, in contact with the highest wisdom. You occupy a position, moreover, thanks to which your carriage—well, by this time, in the eye of London, also occupies one." But she was going out, and he mustn't stand in her way. What had happened the next minutes was first that she had denied she was going out, so that he might prolong his stay; and second that she had said she would go out with pleasure if he would like to drive—that in fact there were always things to do, that there had been a question for her to-day of several in particular, and that this in short was why the carriage had been ordered so early. They perceived, as she said these things, that an enquirer had presented himself, and, coming back, they found Milly's servant announcing the carriage and prepared to accompany her. This appeared to have for her the effect of settling the matter—on the basis, that is, of Densher's happy response. Densher's happy response, however, had as yet hung fire, the process we have described in him operating by this time with extreme intensity. The system of not pulling up, not breaking off, had already brought him headlong, he seemed to feel, to where they actually stood; and just now it was, with a vengeance, that he must do either one thing or the other. He had been waiting for some moments, which probably seemed to him longer than they were; this was because he was anxiously watching himself wait. He couldn't keep that up for ever; and since one thing or the other was what he must do, it was for the other that he presently became conscious of having decided. If he had been drifting it settled itself in the manner of a bump, of considerable violence, against a firm object in the stream. "Oh yes; I'll go with you with pleasure. It's a charming idea."

She gave no look to thank him—she rather looked away; she only said at once to her servant, "In ten minutes"; and then to her visitor, as the man went out, "We'll go somewhere—I shall like that. But I must ask of you time—as little as possible—to get ready." She looked over the room to provide for him, keep him there. "There are books and things—plenty; and I dress very quickly." He caught her eyes only as she went, on which he thought them pretty and touching.

Why especially touching at that instant he could certainly scarce have said; it was involved, it was lost in the sense of her wishing to oblige him. Clearly what had occurred was her having wished it so that she had made him simply wish, in civil acknowledgement, to oblige *her;* which he had now fully done by turning his corner. He was quite round it, his corner, by the time the door had closed upon her and he stood there alone. Alone he remained for three minutes more—remained with several very living little matters to think about. One of these was the phenomenon—typical, highly American, he would have said—of Milly's extreme spontaneity. It was perhaps rather as if he had sought refuge—refuge from another question—in the almost exclusive contemplation of this. Yet this, in its way, led him nowhere; not even to a sound generalization about American girls. It was spontaneous for his young friend to have asked him to drive with her alone—since she hadn't mentioned her companion; but she struck him after all as no more advanced in doing it than Kate, for instance, who wasn't an American girl, might have struck him in not doing it. Besides, Kate *would* have done it, though Kate wasn't at all, in the same sense as Milly, spontaneous. And then in addition Kate *had* done it—or things very like it. Furthermore he was engaged to Kate—even if his ostensibly not being put her public freedom on other grounds. On all grounds, at any rate, the relation between Kate and freedom, between freedom and Kate, was a different one from any he could associate or cultivate, as to anything, with the girl who had just left him to prepare to give herself up to him. It had never struck him before, and he moved about the room while he thought of it, touching none of the books placed at his disposal. Milly was forward, as might be said, but not advanced; whereas Kate was backward—backward still, comparatively, as an English girl—and yet advanced in a high degree. However—though this didn't straighten it out—Kate was of course two or three years older; which at their time of life considerably counted.

Thus ingeniously discriminating, Densher continued slowly to wander; yet without keeping at bay for long the sense of having rounded his corner. He had so rounded it that he felt himself lose even the option of taking advantage of Milly's absence to retrace his steps. If he might have turned tail, vulgarly speaking, five minutes before, he couldn't turn tail now; he must simply wait there with his consciousness charged to the brim. Quickly enough moreover that issue was closed from without; in the course of three minutes more Miss Theale's servant had returned. He preceded a visitor whom he had met, obviously, at the foot of the stairs and whom, throwing open the door, he loudly announced as Miss Croy. Kate, on following him in, stopped short at sight of Densher—only, after an instant, as the young man saw with free amusement, not from surprise and still less from discomfiture. Densher immediately gave his explanation—Miss Theale had gone to prepare to drive—on receipt of which the servant effaced himself.

"And you're going with her?" Kate asked.

"Yes—with your approval; which I've taken, as you see, for granted."

"Oh," she laughed, "my approval's complete!" She was thoroughly consistent and handsome about it.

"What I mean is of course," he went on—for he was sensibly affected by her gaiety—"at your so lively instigation."

She had looked about the room—she might have been vaguely looking for signs of the duration, of the character of his visit, a momentary aid in taking a decision. “Well, instigation then, as much as you like.” She treated it as pleasant, the success of her plea with him; she made a fresh joke of this direct impression of it. “So much so as that? Do you know I think I won’t wait?”

“Not to see her—after coming?”

“Well, with you in the field—! I came for news of her, but she must be all right. If she *is*—”

But he took her straight up. “Ah how do I know?” He was moved to say more. “It’s not I who am responsible for her, my dear. It seems to me it’s you.” She struck him as making light of a matter that had been costing him sundry qualms; so that they couldn’t both be quite just. Either she was too easy or he had been too anxious. He didn’t want at all events to feel a fool for that. “I’m doing nothing—and shall not, I assure you, do anything but what I’m told.”

Their eyes met with some intensity over the emphasis he had given his words; and he had taken it from her the next moment that he really needn’t get into a state. What in the world was the matter? She asked it, with interest, for all answer. “Isn’t she better—if she’s able to see you?”

“She assures me she’s in perfect health.”

Kate’s interest grew. “I knew she would.” On which she added:

“It won’t have been really for illness that she stayed away last night.”

“For what then?”

“Well—for nervousness.”

“Nervousness about what?”

“Oh you know!” She spoke with a hint of impatience, smiling however the next moment. “I’ve told you that.”

He looked at her to recover in her face what she had told him; then it was as if what he saw there prompted him to say: “What have you told *her?”*

She gave him her controlled smile, and it was all as if they remembered where they were, liable to surprise, talking with softened voices, even stretching their opportunity, by such talk, beyond a quite right feeling. Milly’s room would be close at hand, and yet they were saying things—! For a moment, none the less, they kept it up. “Ask *her,* if you like; you’re free—she’ll tell you. Act as you think best; don’t trouble about what you think I may or mayn’t have told. I’m all right with her,” said Kate. “So there you are.”

“If you mean *here* I am,” he answered, “it’s unmistakable. If you also mean that her believing in you is all I have to do with you’re so far right as that she certainly does believe in you.”

“Well then take example by her.”

“She’s really doing it for you,” Densher continued. “She’s driving me out for you.”

“In that case,” said Kate with her soft tranquillity, “you can do it a little for *her.* I’m not afraid,” she smiled.

He stood before her a moment, taking in again the face she put on it and affected again, as he had already so often been, by more things in this face and in her whole person and presence than he was, to his relief, obliged to find words for. It wasn’t, under such impressions, a question of words. “I do nothing for any one in the world but you. But for you I’ll do anything.”

“Good, good,” said Kate. “That’s how I like you.”

He waited again an instant. “Then you swear to it?”

“To ‘it’? To what?”

“Why that you do ‘like’ me. Since it’s all for that, you know, that I’m letting you do—well. God knows what with me.”

She gave at this, with a stare, a disheartened gesture—the sense of which she immediately further expressed. “If you don’t believe in me then, after all, hadn’t you better break off before you’ve gone further?”

“Break off with you?”

“Break off with Milly. You might go now,” she said, “and I’ll stay and explain to her why it is.”

He wondered—as if it struck him. “What would you say?”

“Why that you find you can’t stand her, and that there’s nothing for me but to bear with you as I best may.”

He considered of this. “How much do you abuse me to her?”

“Exactly enough. As much as you see by her attitude.”

Again he thought. “It doesn’t seem to me I ought to mind her attitude.”

“Well then, just as you like. I’ll stay and do my best for you.”

He saw she was sincere, was really giving him a chance; and that of itself made things clearer. The feeling of how far he had gone came back to him not in repentance, but in this very vision of an escape; and it was not of what he had done, but of what Kate offered, that he now weighed the consequence. “Won’t it make her —her not finding me here—be rather more sure there’s something between us?”

Kate thought. “Oh I don’t know. It will of course greatly upset her. But you needn’t trouble about that. She won’t die of it.”

“Do you mean she *will?”* Densher presently asked.

“Don’t put me questions when you don’t believe what I say. You make too many conditions.”

She spoke now with a shade of rational weariness that made the want of pliancy, the failure to oblige her, look poor and ugly; so that what it suddenly came back to for him was his deficiency in the things a man of any taste, so engaged, so enlisted, would have liked to make sure of being able to show—imagination, tact, positively even humour. The circumstance is doubtless odd, but the truth is none the less that the speculation uppermost with him at this juncture was: “What if I should begin to bore this creature?” And that, within a few seconds, had translated itself. “If you’ll swear again you love me—!”

She looked about, at door and window, as if he were asking for more than he said. “Here? There’s nothing between us here,” Kate smiled.

“Oh *isn’t* there?” Her smile itself, with this, had so settled something for him that he had come to her pleadingly and holding out his hands, which she immediately seized with her own as if both to check him and to keep him. It was by keeping him thus for a minute that she did check him; she held him long enough, while, with their eyes deeply meeting, they waited in silence for him to recover himself and renew his discretion. He coloured as with a return of the sense of where they were, and that gave her precisely one of her usual victories, which immediately took further form. By the time he had dropped her hands he had again taken hold, as it were, of Milly’s. It was not at any rate with Milly he had broken. “I’ll do all you wish,” he declared as if to acknowledge the acceptance of his condition that he had practically, after all, drawn from her —a declaration on which she then, recurring to her first idea, promptly acted.

“If you *are* as good as that I go. You’ll tell her that, finding you with her, I wouldn’t wait. Say that, you know, from yourself. She’ll understand.”

She had reached the door with it—she was full of decision; but he had before she left him one more doubt. “I don’t see how she can understand enough, you know, without understanding too much.”

“You don’t need to see.”[18]

He required then a last injunction. “I must simply go it blind?”

“You must simply be kind to her.”

“And leave the rest to you?”

“Leave the rest to *her,”* said Kate disappearing. It came back then afresh to that, as it had come before. Milly, three minutes after Kate had gone, returned in her array—her big black hat, so little superstitiously in the fashion, her fine black garments throughout, the swathing of her throat, which Densher vaguely took for an infinite number of yards of priceless lace, and which, its folded fabric kept in place by heavy rows of pearls, hung down to her feet like the stole of a priestess. He spoke to her at once of their friend’s visit and flight. “She hadn’t known she’d find me,” he said—and said at present without difficulty. He had so rounded his corner that it wasn’t a question of a word more or less.

She took this account of the matter as quite sufficient; she glossed over whatever might be awkward. “I’m sorry—but I of course often see *her.”* He felt the discrimination in his favor and how it justified Kate. This was Milly’s tone when the matter was left to her. Well, it should now be wholly left.

BOOK SEVENTH

—I—

When Kate and Densher abandoned her to Mrs. Stringham on the day of her meeting them together and bringing them to luncheon, Milly, face to face with that companion, had had one of those moments in which the warned, the anxious fighter of the battle of life, as if once again feeling for the sword at his side, carries his hand straight to the quarter of his courage. She laid hers firmly on her heart, and the two women stood there showing each other a strange front. Susan Shepherd had received their great doctor's visit, which had been clearly no small affair for her; but Milly had since then, with insistence, kept in place, against communication and betrayal, as she now practically confessed, the barrier of their invited guests. "You've been too dear. With what I see you're full of you treated them beautifully. *Isn't* Kate charming when she wants to be?"

Poor Susie's expression, contending at first, as in a high fine spasm, with different dangers, had now quite let itself go. She had to make an effort to reach a point in space already so remote. "Miss Croy? Oh she was pleasant and clever. She knew," Mrs. Stringham added. "She knew."

Milly braced herself—but conscious above all, at the moment, of a high compassion for her mate. She made her out as struggling—struggling in all her nature against the betrayal of pity, which in itself, given her nature, could only be a torment. Milly gathered from the struggle how much there was of the pity, and how therefore it was both in her tenderness and in her conscience that Mrs. Stringham suffered. Wonderful and beautiful it was that this impression instantly steadied the girl. Ruefully asking herself on what basis of ease, with the drop of their barrier, they were to find themselves together, she felt the question met with a relief that was almost joy. The basis, the inevitable basis, was that she was going to be sorry for Susie, who, to all appearance, had been condemned in so much more uncomfortable a manner to be sorry for *her*. Mrs. Stringham's sorrow would hurt Mrs. Stringham, but how could her own ever hurt? She had, the poor girl, at all events, on the spot, five minutes of exaltation in which she turned the tables on her friend with a pass of the hand, a gesture of an energy that made a wind in the air. "Kate knew," she asked, "that you were full of Sir Luke Strett?"

"She spoke of nothing, but she was gentle and nice; she seemed to want to help me through." Which the good lady had no sooner said, however, than she almost tragically gasped at herself. She glared at Milly with a pretended pluck. "What I mean is that she saw one had been taken up with something. When I say she knows I should say she's a person who guesses." And her grimace was also, on its side, heroic. "But *she* doesn't matter, Milly."

The girl felt she by this time could face anything. "Nobody matters, Susie. Nobody." Which her next words, however, rather contradicted. "Did he take it ill that I wasn't here to see him? Wasn't it really just what he wanted—to have it out, so much more simply, with *you?"*

"We didn't have anything 'out,' Milly," Mrs. Stringham delicately quavered.

"Didn't he awfully like you," Milly went on, "and didn't he think you the most charming person I could possibly have referred him to for an account of me? Didn't you hit it off tremendously together and in fact fall quite in love, so that it will really be a great advantage for you to have me as a common ground? You're going to make, I can see, no end of a good thing of me."

"My own child, my own child!" Mrs. Stringham pleadingly murmured; yet showing as she did so that she feared the effect even of deprecation.

"Isn't he beautiful and good too himself?—altogether, whatever he may say, a lovely acquaintance to have made? You're just the right people for me—I see it now; and do you know what, between you, you must do?" Then as Susie still but stared, wonderstruck and holding herself: "You must simply see me through. Any way you choose. Make it out together. I, on my side, will be beautiful too, and we'll be—the three of us, with whatever others, oh as many as the case requires, any one you like!—a sight for the gods. I'll be as easy for you as carrying a feather." Susie took it for a moment in such silence that her young friend almost saw her—and scarcely withheld the observation—as taking it for "a part of the disease." This accordingly helped Milly to be, as she judged, definite and wise. "He's at any rate awfully interesting, isn't he?—which is so much to

the good. We haven't at least—as we might have, with the way we tumbled into it—got hold of one of the dreary."

"Interesting, dearest?"—Mrs. Stringham felt her feet firmer. "I don't know if he's interesting or not; but I do know, my own," she continued to quaver, "that he's just as much interested as you could possibly desire."

"Certainly—that's it. Like all the world."

"No, my precious, not like all the world. Very much more deeply and intelligently."

"Ah there you are!" Milly laughed. "That's the way, Susie, I want you. So 'buck' up, my dear. We'll have beautiful times with him. Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying, Milly." And poor Susie's face registered the sublimity of her lie.

It was at this that, too sharply penetrated, her companion went to her, met by her with an embrace in which things were said that exceeded speech. Each held and clasped the other as if to console her for this unnamed woe, the woe for Mrs. Stringham of learning the torment of helplessness, the woe for Milly of having her, at such a time, to think of. Milly's assumption was immense, and the difficulty for her friend was that of not being able to gainsay it without bringing it more to the proof than tenderness and vagueness could permit. Nothing in fact came to the proof between them but that they could thus cling together—except indeed that, as we have indicated, the pledge of protection and support was all the younger woman's own. "I don't ask you," she presently said, "what he told you for yourself, nor what he told you to tell me, nor how he took it, really, that I had left him to you, nor what passed between you about me in any way. It wasn't to get that out of you that I took my means to make sure of your meeting freely—for there are things I don't want to know. I shall see him again and again and shall know more than enough. All I do want is that you shall see me through on his basis, whatever it is; which it's enough—for the purpose—that you yourself should know: that is with him to show you how. I'll make it charming for you—that's what I mean; I'll keep you up to it in such a way that half the time you won't know you're doing it. And for that you're to rest upon me. There. It's understood. We keep each other going, and you may absolutely feel of me that I shan't break down. So, with the way you haven't so much as a dig of the elbow to fear, how could you be safer?"

"He told me I can help you—of course he told me that," Susie, on her side, eagerly contended. "Why shouldn't he, and for what else have I come out with you? But he told me nothing dreadful-nothing, nothing, nothing," the poor lady passionately protested. "Only that you must do as you like and as he tells you—which is just simply to do as you like."

"I must keep in sight of him. I must from time to time go to him. But that's of course doing as I like. It's lucky," Milly smiled, "that I like going to him."

Mrs. Stringham was here in agreement; she gave a clutch at the account of their situation that most showed it was workable. "That's what *will* be charming for me, and what I'm sure he really wants of me—to help you do as you like."

"And also a little, won't it be," Milly laughed, "to save me from the consequences? Of course," she added, "there must first *be* things I like."

"Oh I think you'll find some," Mrs. Stringham more bravely said. "I think there *are* some—as for instance just this one. I mean," she explained, "really having us so."

Milly thought. "Just as if I wanted you comfortable about him, and him the same about you? Yes—I shall get the good of it."

Susan Shepherd appeared to wander from this into a slight confusion. "Which of them are you talking of?"

Milly wondered an instant—then had a light. "I'm not talking of Mr. Densher." With which moreover she showed amusement. "Though if you can be comfortable about Mr. Densher too so much the better."

"Oh you meant Sir Luke Strett? Certainly he's a fine type. Do you know," Susie continued, "whom he reminds me of? Of *our* great man—Dr. Buttrick of Boston."

Milly recognized Dr. Buttrick of Boston, but she dropped him after a tributary pause. "What do you think, now that you've seen him, of Mr. Densher?"

It was not till after consideration, with her eyes fixed on her friend's, that Susie produced her answer. "I think he's very handsome."

Milly remained smiling at her, though putting on a little the manner of a teacher with a pupil. "Well, that will do for the first time. I *have* done," she went on, "what I wanted."

"Then that's all *we* want. You see there are plenty of things."

Milly shook her head for the “plenty.” “The best is not to know—that includes them all. I don’t—I don’t know. Nothing about anything—except that you’re *with* me. Remember that, please. There won’t be anything that, on my side, for you, I shall forget. So it’s all right.”

The effect of it by this time was fairly, as intended, to sustain Susie, who dropped in spite of herself into the reassuring. “Most certainly it’s all right. I think you ought to understand that he sees no reason—”

“Why I shouldn’t have a grand long life?” Milly had taken it straight up, as to understand it and for a moment consider it. But she disposed of it otherwise. “Oh of course I know that.” She spoke as if her friend’s point were small.

Mrs. Stringham tried to enlarge it. “Well, what I mean is that he didn’t say to me anything that he hasn’t said to yourself.”

“Really?—I would in his place!” She might have been disappointed, but she had her good humour. “He tells me to *live*”—and she oddly limited the word.

It left Susie a little at sea. “Then what do you want more?”

“My dear,” the girl presently said, “I don’t ‘want,’ as I assure you, anything. Still,” she added, “I *am* living. Oh yes, I’m living.”

It put them again face to face, but it had wound Mrs. Stringham up. “So am I then, you’ll see!”—she spoke with the note of her recovery. Yet it was her wisdom now—meaning by it as much as she did—not to say more than that. She had risen by Milly’s aid to a certain command of what was before them; the ten minutes of their talk had in fact made her more distinctly aware of the presence in her mind of a new idea. It was really perhaps an old idea with a new value; it had at all events begun during the last hour, though at first but feebly, to shine with a special light. That was because in the morning darkness had so suddenly descended—a sufficient shade of night to bring out the power of a star. The dusk might be thick yet, but the sky had comparatively cleared; and Susan Shepherd’s star from this time on continued to twinkle for her. It was for the moment, after her passage with Milly, the one spark left in the heavens. She recognized, as she continued to watch it, that it had really been set there by Sir Luke Strett’s visit and that the impressions immediately following had done no more than fix it. Milly’s reappearance with Mr. Densher at her heels—or, so oddly perhaps, at Miss Croy’s heels, Miss Croy being at Milly’s—had contributed to this effect, though it was only with the lapse of the greater obscurity that Susie made that out. The obscurity had reigned during the hour of their friends’ visit, faintly clearing indeed while, in one of the rooms, Kate Croy’s remarkable advance to her intensified the fact that Milly and the young man were conjoined in the other. If it hadn’t acquired on the spot all the intensity of which it was capable, this was because the poor lady still sat in her primary gloom, the gloom the great benignant doctor had practically left behind him.

The intensity the circumstance in question might wear to the informed imagination would have been sufficiently revealed for us, no doubt—and with other things to our purpose—in two or three of those confidential passages with Mrs. Lowder that she now permitted herself. She hadn’t yet been so glad that she believed in her old friend; for if she hadn’t had, at such a pass, somebody or other to believe in she should certainly have stumbled by the way. Discretion had ceased to consist of silence; silence was gross and thick, whereas wisdom should taper, however tremulously, to a point. She betook herself to Lancaster Gate the morning after the colloquy just noted; and there, in Maud Manningham’s own sanctum, she gradually found relief in giving an account of herself. An account of herself was one of the things that she had long been in the habit of expecting herself regularly to give—the regularity depending of course much on such tests of merit as might, by laws beyond her control, rise in her path. She never spared herself in short a proper sharpness of conception of how she had behaved, and it was a statement that she for the most part found herself able to make. What had happened at present was that nothing, as she felt, was left of her to report to; she was all too sunk in the inevitable and the abysmal. To give an account of herself she must give it to somebody else, and her first installment of it to her hostess was that she must please let her cry. She couldn’t cry, with Milly in observation, at the hotel, which she had accordingly left for that purpose; and the power happily came to her with the good opportunity. She cried and cried at first—she confined herself to that; it was for the time the best statement of her business. Mrs. Lowder moreover intelligently took it as such, though knocking off a note or two more, as she said, while Susie sat near her table. She could resist the contagion of tears, but her patience did justice to her visitor’s most vivid plea for it. “I shall never be able, you know, to cry again—at least not ever with her; so I must take it out when I can. Even if she does herself it won’t be for me to give away; for what would that be but a confession of despair? I’m not with her for that—I’m with her to be regularly sublime. Besides, Milly won’t cry herself.”

“I’m sure I hope,” said Mrs. Lowder, “that she won’t have occasion to.”

“She won’t even if she does have occasion. She won’t shed a tear. There’s something that will prevent her.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Lowder.

“Yes, her pride,” Mrs. Stringham explained in spite of her friend’s doubt, and it was with this that her communication took consistent form. It had never been pride, Maud Manningham had hinted, that kept *her* from crying when other things made for it; it had only been that these same things, at such times, made still more for business, arrangements, correspondence, the ringing of bells, the marshalling of servants, the taking of decisions. “I might be crying now,” she said, “if I weren’t writing letters”—and this quite without harshness for her anxious companion, to whom she allowed just the administrative margin for difference. She had interrupted her no more than she would have interrupted the piano-tuner. It gave poor Susie time; and when Mrs. Lowder, to save appearances and catch the post, had, with her addressed and stamped notes, met at the door of the room the footman summoned by the pressure of a knob, the facts of the case were sufficiently ready for her. It took but two or three, however, given their importance, to lay the ground for the great one—Mrs. Stringham’s interview of the day before with Sir Luke, who had wished to see her about Milly.

“He had wished it himself?”

“I think he was glad of it. Clearly indeed he was. He stayed a quarter of an hour. I could see that for *him* it was long. He’s interested,” said Mrs. Stringham.

“Do you mean in her case?”

“He says it *isn’t* a case.”

“What then is it?”

“It isn’t, at least,” Mrs. Stringham explained, “the case she believed it to be—though it at any rate *might* be—when, without my knowledge, she went to see him. She went because there was something she was afraid of, and he examined her thoroughly—he has made sure. She’s wrong—she hasn’t what she thought.”

“And what did she think?” Mrs. Lowder demanded.

“He didn’t tell me.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“I asked nothing,” said poor Susie—“I only took what he gave me. He gave me no more than he had to—he was beautiful,” she went on. “He is, thank God, interested.”

“He must have been interested in you, dear,” Maud Manningham observed with kindness.

Her visitor met it with candor. “Yes, love, I think he is. I mean that he sees what he can do with me.”

Mrs. Lowder took it rightly. “For *her.”*

“For her. Anything in the world he will or he must. He can use me to the last bone, and he likes at least that. He says the great thing for her is to be happy.”

“It’s surely the great thing for every one. Why, therefore,” Mrs. Lowder handsomely asked, “should we cry so hard about it?”

“Only,” poor Susie wailed, “that it’s so strange, so beyond us. I mean if she can’t be.”

“She must be.” Mrs. Lowder knew no impossibles. “She *shall* be.”

“Well—if you’ll help. He thinks, you know, we can help.”

Mrs. Lowder faced a moment, in her massive way, what Sir Luke Strett thought. She sat back there, her knees apart, not unlike a picturesque ear-ringed matron at a market-stall; while her friend, before her, dropped their items, tossed the separate truths of the matter one by one, into her capacious apron. “But is that all he came to you for—to tell you she must be happy?”

“That she must be *made* so—that’s the point. It seemed enough, as he told me,” Mrs. Stringham went on; “he makes it somehow such a grand possible affair.”

“Ah well, if he makes it possible!”

“I mean especially he makes it grand. He gave it to me, that is, as *my* part. The rest’s his own.”

“And what’s the rest?” Mrs. Lowder asked.

“I don’t know. *His* business. He means to keep hold of her.”

“Then why do you say it isn’t a ‘case’? It must be very much of one.”

Everything in Mrs. Stringham confessed to the extent of it. “It’s only that it isn’t the case she herself supposed.”

“It’s another?”

“It’s another.”

“Examining her for what she supposed he finds something else?”

“Something else.”

“And what does he find?”

“Ah,” Mrs. Stringham cried, “God keep me from knowing!”

“He didn’t tell you that?”

But poor Susie had recovered herself. “What I mean is that if it’s there I shall know in time. He’s considering, but I can trust him for it—because he does, I feel, trust me. He’s considering,” she repeated.

“He’s in other words not sure?”

“Well, he’s watching. I think that’s what he means. She’s to get away now, but to come back to him in three months.”

“Then I think,” said Maud Lowder, “that he oughtn’t meanwhile to scare us.”

It roused Susie a little, Susie, being already enrolled in the great doctor’s cause. This came out at least in her glimmer of reproach. “Does it scare us to enlist us for her happiness?”

Mrs. Lowder was rather stiff for it. “Yes; it scares *me*. I’m always scared—I may call it so—till I understand. What happiness is he talking about?”

Mrs. Stringham at this came straight. “Oh you know!”

She had really said it so that her friend had to take it; which the latter in fact after a moment showed herself as having done. A strange light humour in the matter even perhaps suddenly aiding, she met it with a certain accommodation. “Well, say one seems to see. The point is—!” But, fairly too full now of her question, she dropped.

“The point is will it *cure?”*

“Precisely. Is it absolutely a remedy—*the* specific?”

“Well, I should think we might know!” Mrs. Stringham delicately declared.

“Ah but we haven’t the complaint.”

“Have you never, dearest, been in love?” Susan Shepherd inquired.

“Yes, my child; but not by the doctor’s direction.”

Maud Manningham had spoken perforce with a break into momentary mirth, which operated—and happily too—as a challenge to her visitor’s spirit. “Oh of course we don’t ask his leave to fall. But it’s something to know he thinks it good for us.”

“My dear woman,” Mrs. Lowder cried, “it strikes me we know it without him. So that when *that’s* all he has to tell us—!”

“Ah,” Mrs. Stringham interposed, “it isn’t ‘all.’ I feel Sir Luke will have more; he won’t have put me off with anything inadequate. I’m to see him again; he as good as told me that he’ll wish it. So it won’t be for nothing.”

“Then what will it be for? Do you mean he has somebody of his own to propose? Do you mean you told him nothing?”

Mrs. Stringham dealt with these questions. “I showed him I understood him. That was all I could do. I didn’t feel at liberty to be explicit; but I felt, even though his visit so upset me, the comfort of what I had from you night before last.”

“What I spoke to you of in the carriage when we had left her with Kate?”

“You had *seen*, apparently, in three minutes. And now that he’s here, now that I’ve met him and had my impression of him, I feel,” said Mrs. Stringham, “that you’ve been magnificent.”

“Of course I’ve been magnificent. When,” asked Maud Manningham, “was I anything else? But Milly won’t be, you know, if she marries Merton Densher.”

“Oh it’s always magnificent to marry the man one loves. But we’re going fast!” Mrs. Stringham woefully smiled.

“The thing is to go fast if I see the case right. What had I after all but my instinct of that on coming back with you, night before last, to pick up Kate? I felt what I felt—I knew in my bones the man had returned.”

“That’s just where, as I say, you’re magnificent. But wait,” said Mrs. Stringham, “till you’ve seen him.”

“I shall see him immediately”—Mrs. Lowder took it up with decision. “What is then,” she asked, “your impression?”

Mrs. Stringham’s impression seemed lost in her doubts. “How can he ever care for her?”

Her companion, in her companion’s heavy manner, sat on it. “By being put in the way of it.”

“For God’s sake then,” Mrs. Stringham wailed, *“put* him in the way! You have him, one feels, in your hand.”

Maud Lowder’s eyes at this rested on her friend’s. “Is that your impression of him?”

“It’s my impression, dearest, of you. You handle every one.”

Mrs. Lowder’s eyes still rested, and Susan Shepherd now felt, for a wonder, not less sincere by seeing that she pleased her. But there was a great limitation. “I don’t handle Kate.”

It suggested something that her visitor hadn’t yet had from her—something the sense of which made Mrs. Stringham gasp. “Do you mean Kate cares for *him*?”

That fact the lady of Lancaster Gate had up to this moment, as we know, enshrouded, and her friend’s quick question had produced a change in her face. She blinked—then looked at the question hard; after which, whether she had inadvertently betrayed herself or had only reached a decision and then been affected by the quality of Mrs. Stringham’s surprise, she accepted all results. What took place in her for Susan Shepherd was not simply that she made the best of them, but that she suddenly saw more in them to her purpose than she could have imagined. A certain impatience in fact marked in her this transition: she had been keeping back, very hard, an important truth, and wouldn’t have liked to hear that she hadn’t concealed it cleverly. Susie nevertheless felt herself pass as not a little of a fool with her for not having thought of it. What Susie indeed, however, most thought of at present, in the quick, new light of it, was the wonder of Kate’s dissimulation. She had time for that view while she waited for an answer to her cry. “Kate thinks she cares. But she’s mistaken. And no one knows it.” These things, distinct and responsible, were Mrs. Lowder’s retort. Yet they weren’t all of it. “You don’t know it—that must be your line. Or rather your line must be that you deny it utterly.”

“Deny that she cares for him?”

“Deny that she so much as thinks that she does. Positively and absolutely. Deny that you’ve so much as heard of it.”

Susie faced this new duty. “To Milly, you mean—if she asks?”

“To Milly, naturally. No one else *will* ask.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Stringham after a moment, “Milly won’t.”

Mrs. Lowder wondered. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, the more I think of it. And luckily for *me*. I lie badly.”

“I lie well, thank God,” Mrs. Lowder almost snorted, “when, as sometimes will happen, there’s nothing else so good. One must always do the best. But without lies then,” she went on, “perhaps we can work it out.” Her interest had risen; her friend saw her, as within some minutes, more enrolled and inflamed—presently felt in her what had made the difference. Mrs. Stringham, it was true, descried this at the time but dimly; she only made out at first that Maud had found a reason for helping her. The reason was that, strangely, she might help Maud too, for which she now desired to profess herself ready even to lying. What really perhaps most came out for her was that her hostess was a little disappointed at her doubt of the social solidity of this appliance; and that in turn was to become a steadier light. The truth about Kate’s delusion, as her aunt presented it, the delusion about the state of her affections, which might be removed-this was apparently the ground on which they now might more intimately meet. Mrs. Stringham saw herself recruited for the removal of Kate’s delusion —by arts, however, in truth, that she as yet quite failed to compass. Or was it perhaps to be only for the

removal of Mr. Densher's?—success in which indeed might entail other successes. Before that job, unfortunately, her heart had already failed. She felt that she believed in her bones what Milly believed, and what would now make working for Milly such a dreadful upward tug. All this within her was confusedly present—a cloud of questions out of which Maud Manningham's large seated self loomed, however, as a mass more and more definite, taking in fact for the consultative relation something of the form of an oracle. From the oracle the sound did come—or at any rate the sense did, a sense all accordant with the insufflation she had just seen working. "Yes," the sense was, "I'll help you for Milly, because if that comes off I shall be helped, by its doing so, for Kate"—a view into which Mrs. Stringham could now sufficiently enter. She found herself of a sudden, strange to say, quite willing to operate to Kate's harm, or at least to Kate's good as Mrs. Lowder with a noble anxiety measured it. She found herself in short not caring what became of Kate—only convinced at bottom of the predominance of Kate's star. Kate wasn't in danger, Kate wasn't pathetic; Kate Croy, whatever happened, would take care of Kate Croy. She saw moreover by this time that her friend was traveling even beyond her own speed. Mrs. Lowder had already, in mind, drafted a rough plan of action, a plan vividly enough thrown off as she said: "You must stay on a few days, and you must immediately, both of you, meet him at dinner." In addition to which Maud claimed the merit of having by an instinct of pity, of prescient wisdom, done much, two nights before, to prepare that ground. "The poor child, when I was with her there while you were getting your shawl, quite gave herself away to me."

"Oh I remember how you afterwards put it to me. Though it was nothing more," Susie did herself the justice to observe, "than what I too had quite felt."

But Mrs. Lowder fronted her so on this that she wondered what she had said. "I suppose I ought to be edified at what you can so beautifully give up."

"Give up?" Mrs. Stringham echoed. "Why, I give up nothing—I cling."

Her hostess showed impatience, turning again with some stiffness to her great brass-bound cylinder-desk and giving a push to an object or two disposed there. "I give up then. You know how little such a person as Mr. Densher was to be my idea for her. You know what I've been thinking perfectly possible."

"Oh you've been great"—Susie was perfectly fair. "A duke, a duchess, a princess, a palace: you've made me believe in them too. But where we break down is that *she* doesn't believe in them. Luckily for her—as it seems to be turning out—she doesn't want them. So what's one to do? I assure you I've had many dreams. But I've only one dream now."

Mrs. Stringham's tone in these last words gave so fully her meaning that Mrs. Lowder could but show herself as taking it in. They sat a moment longer confronted on it. "Her having what she does want?"

"If it *will* do anything for her."

Mrs. Lowder seemed to think what it might do; but she spoke for the instant of something else. "It does provoke me a bit, you know—for of course I'm a brute. And I had thought of all sorts of things. Yet it doesn't prevent the fact that we must be decent."

"We must take her"—Mrs. Stringham carried that out—"as she is."

"And we must take Mr. Densher as he is." With which Mrs. Lowder gave a sombre laugh. "It's a pity he isn't better!"

"Well, if he were better," her friend rejoined, "you'd have liked him for your niece; and in that case Milly would interfere. I mean," Susie added, "interfere with you."

"She interferes with me as it is—not that it matters now. But I saw Kate and her—really as soon as you came to me—set up side by side. I saw your girl—I don't mind telling you—helping my girl; and when I say that," Mrs. Lowder continued, "you'll probably put in for yourself that it was part of the reason of my welcome to you. So you see what I give up. I do give it up. But when I take that line," she further set forth, "I take it handsomely. So good-bye to it all. Good-day to Mrs. Densher! Heavens!" she growled.

Susie held herself a minute. "Even as Mrs. Densher my girl will be somebody."

"Yes, she won't be nobody. Besides," said Mrs. Lowder, "we're talking in the air."

Her companion sadly assented. "We're leaving everything out."

"It's nevertheless interesting." And Mrs. Lowder had another thought. "He's not quite nobody either." It brought her back to the question she had already put and which her friend hadn't at the time dealt with. "What in fact do you make of him?"

Susan Shepherd, at this, for reasons not clear even to herself, was moved a little to caution. So she remained general. "He's charming."

She had met Mrs. Lowder's eyes with that extreme pointedness in her own to which people resort when they are not quite candid—a circumstance that had its effect. "Yes; he's charming."

The effect of the words, however, was equally marked; they almost determined in Mrs. Stringham a return of amusement. "I thought you didn't like him!"

"I don't like him for Kate."

"But you don't like him for Milly either."

Mrs. Stringham rose as she spoke, and her friend also got up. "I like him, my dear, for myself."

"Then that's the best way of all."

"Well, it's one way. He's not good enough for my niece, and he's not good enough for you. One's an aunt, one's a wretch and one's a fool."

"Oh *I'm* not—not either," Susie declared.

But her companion kept on. "One lives for others. You do that. If I were living for myself I shouldn't at all mind him."

But Mrs. Stringham was sturdier. "Ah if I find him charming it's however I'm living."

Well, it broke Mrs. Lowder down. She hung fire but an instant, giving herself away with a laugh. "Of course he's all right in himself."

"That's all I contend," Susie said with more reserve; and the note in question—what Merton Densher was "in himself"—closed practically, with some inconsequence, this first of their councils.

—II—

It had at least made the difference for them, they could feel, of an informed state in respect to the great doctor, whom they were now to take as watching, waiting, studying, or at any rate as proposing to himself some such process before he should make up his mind. Mrs. Stringham understood him as considering the matter meanwhile in a spirit that, on this same occasion, at Lancaster Gate, she had come back to a rough notation of before retiring. She followed the course of his reckoning. If what they had talked of *could* happen —if Milly, that is, could have her thoughts taken off herself—it wouldn't do any harm and might conceivably do much good. If it couldn't happen—if, anxiously, though tactfully working, they themselves, conjoined, could do nothing to contribute to it—they would be in no worse a box than before. Only in this latter case the girl would have had her free range for the summer, for the autumn; she would have done her best in the sense enjoined on her, and, coming back at the end to her eminent man, would—besides having more to show him —find him more ready to go on with her. It was visible further to Susan Shepherd—as well as being ground for a second report to her old friend—that Milly did her part for a working view of the general case, inasmuch as she mentioned frankly and promptly that she meant to go and say good-bye to Sir Luke Strett and thank him. She even specified what she was to thank him for, his having been so easy about her behaviour.

"You see I didn't know that—for the liberty I took—I shouldn't afterwards get a stiff note from him."

So much Milly had said to her, and it had made her a trifle rash. "Oh you'll never get a stiff note from him in your life."

She felt her rashness, the next moment, at her young friend's question. "Why not, as well as any one else who has played him a trick?"

"Well, because he doesn't regard it as a trick. He could understand your action. It's all right, you see."

"Yes—I do see. It is all right. He's easier with me than with any one else, because that's the way to let me down. He's only making believe, and I'm not worth hauling up."

Rueful at having provoked again this ominous flare, poor Susie grasped at her only advantage. "Do you really accuse a man like Sir Luke Strett of trifling with you?"

She couldn't blind herself to the look her companion gave her—a strange half-amused perception of what she made of it. "Well, so far as it's trifling with me to pity me so much."

"He doesn't pity you," Susie earnestly reasoned. "He just—the same as any one else—likes you."

“He has no business then to like me. He’s not the same as any one else.”

“Why not, if he wants to work for you?”

Milly gave her another look, but this time a wonderful smile. “Ah there you are!” Mrs. Stringham coloured, for there indeed she was again. But Milly let her off. “Work for me, all the same—work for me! It’s of course what I want.” Then as usual she embraced her friend. “I’m not going to be as nasty as this to *him.”*

“I’m sure I hope not!”—and Mrs. Stringham laughed for the kiss. “I’ve no doubt, however, he’d take it from you! It’s you, my dear, who are not the same as any one else.”

Milly’s assent to which, after an instant, gave her the last word. “No, so that people can take anything from me.” And what Mrs. Stringham did indeed resignedly take after this was the absence on her part of an account of the visit then paid. It was the beginning in fact between them of an odd independence—an independence positively of action and custom—on the subject of Milly’s future. They went their separate ways with the girl’s intense assent; this being really nothing but what she had so wonderfully put in her plea for after Mrs. Stringham’s first encounter with Sir Luke. She fairly favored the idea that Susie had or was to have other encounters—private pointed personal; she favored every idea, but most of all the idea that she herself was to go on as if nothing were the matter. Since she was to be worked for that would be her way; and though her companions learned from herself nothing of it this was in the event her way with her medical adviser. She put her visit to him on the simplest ground; she had come just to tell him how touched she had been by his good nature. That required little explaining, for, as Mrs. Stringham had said, he quite understood he could but reply that it was all right.

“I had a charming quarter of an hour with that clever lady. You’ve got good friends.”

“So each one of them thinks of all the others. But so I also think,” Milly went on, “of all of them together. You’re excellent for each other. And it’s in that way, I dare say, that you’re best for me.”

There came to her on this occasion one of the strangest of her impressions, which was at the same time one of the finest of her alarms—the glimmer of a vision that if she should go, as it were, too far, she might perhaps deprive their relation of facility if not of value. Going too far was failing to try at least to remain simple. He would be quite ready to hate her if she did, by heading him off at every point, embarrass his exercise of a kindness that, no doubt, rather constituted for him a high method. Susie wouldn’t hate her, since Susie positively wanted to suffer for her; Susie had a noble idea that she might somehow so do her good. Such, however, was not the way in which the greatest of London doctors was to be expected to wish to do it. He wouldn’t have time even should he wish; whereby, in a word, Milly felt herself intimately warned. Face to face there with her smooth strong director, she enjoyed at a given moment quite such another lift of feeling as she had known in her crucial talk with Susie. It came round to the same thing; him too she would help to help her if that could possibly be; but if it couldn’t possibly be she would assist also to make this right. It wouldn’t have taken many minutes more, on the basis in question, almost to reverse for her their characters of patient and physician. What *was* he in fact but patient, what was she but physician, from the moment she embraced once for all the necessity, adopted once for all the policy, of saving him alarms about her subtlety? She would leave the subtlety to him: he would enjoy his use of it, and she herself, no doubt, would in time enjoy his enjoyment. She went so far as to imagine that the inward success of these reflexions flushed her for the minute, to his eyes, with a certain bloom, a comparative appearance of health; and what verily next occurred was that he gave colour to the presumption. “Every little helps, no doubt!”—he noticed good-humouredly her harmless sally. “But, help or no help, you’re looking, you know, remarkably well.”

“Oh I thought I was,” she answered; and it was as if already she saw his line. Only she wondered what he would have guessed. If he had guessed anything at all it would be rather remarkable of him. As for what there was to guess, he couldn’t—if this was present to him—have arrived at it save by his own acuteness. That acuteness was therefore immense; and if it supplied the subtlety she thought of leaving him to, his portion would be none so bad. Neither, for that matter, would hers be—which she was even actually enjoying. She wondered if really then there mightn’t be something for her. She hadn’t been sure in coming to him that she was “better,” and he hadn’t used, he would be awfully careful not to use, that compromising term about her; in spite of all of which she would have been ready to say, for the amiable sympathy of it, “Yes, I must be,” for he had this unaided sense of something that had happened to her. It was a sense unaided, because who could have told him of anything? Susie, she was certain, hadn’t yet seen him again, and there were things it was impossible she could have told him the first time. Since such was his penetration, therefore, why shouldn’t she gracefully, in recognition of it, accept the new circumstance, the one he was clearly wanting to congratulate her on, as a sufficient cause? If one nursed a cause tenderly enough it might produce an effect; and this, to begin with, would be a way of nursing. “You gave me the other day,” she went on, “plenty to think over, and I’ve been doing that—thinking it over—quite as you’ll have probably wished me. I think I must be pretty easy to treat,” she smiled, “since you’ve already done me so much good.”

The only obstacle to reciprocity with him was that he looked in advance so closely related to all one's possibilities that one missed the pleasure of really improving it. "Oh no, you're extremely difficult to treat. I've need with you, I assure you, of all my wit."

"Well, I mean I do come up." She hadn't meanwhile a bit believed in his answer, convinced as she was that if she had been difficult it would be the last thing he would have told her. "I'm doing," she said, "as I like."

"Then it's as I like. But you must really, though we're having such a decent month, get straight away." In pursuance of which, when she had replied with promptitude that her departure—for the Tyrol and then for Venice—was quite fixed for the fourteenth, he took her up with alacrity. "For Venice? That's perfect, for we shall meet there. I've a dream of it for October, when I'm hoping for three weeks off; three weeks during which, if I can get them clear, my niece, a young person who has quite the whip hand of me, is to take me where she prefers. I heard from her only yesterday that she expects to prefer Venice."

"That's lovely then. I shall expect you there. And anything that, in advance or in any way, I can do for you —!"

"Oh thank you. My niece, I seem to feel, does for me. But it will be capital to find you there."

"I think it ought to make you feel," she said after a moment, "that I *am* easy to treat."

But he shook his head again; he wouldn't have it. "You've not come to that *yet."*

"One has to be so bad for it?"

"Well, I don't think I've ever come to it—to 'ease' of treatment. I doubt if it's possible. I've not, if it is, found any one bad enough. The ease, you see, is for *you."*

"I see—I see. "

They had an odd friendly, but perhaps the least bit awkward pause on it; after which Sir Luke asked: "And that clever lady—she goes with you?"

"Mrs. Stringham? Oh dear, yes. She'll stay with me, I hope, to the end."

He had a cheerful blankness. "To the end of what?"

"Well—of everything."

"Ah then," he laughed, "you're in luck. The end of everything is far off. This, you know, I'm hoping," said Sir Luke, "is only the beginning." And the next question he risked might have been a part of his hope. "Just you and she together?"

"No, two other friends; two ladies of whom we've seen more here than of any one and who are just the right people for us."

He thought a moment. "You'll be four women together then?"

"Ah," said Milly, "we're widows and orphans. But I think," she added as if to say what she saw would reassure him, "that we shall not be unattractive, as we move, to gentlemen. When you talk of 'life' I suppose you mean mainly gentlemen."

"When I talk of 'life,' " he made answer after a moment during which he might have been appreciating her raciness—"when I talk of life I think I mean more than anything else the beautiful show of it, in its freshness, made by young persons of your age. So go on as you are. I see more and more how you are. You can't," he went so far as to say for pleasantness, "better it."

She took it from him with a great show of peace. "One of our companions will be Miss Croy, who came with me here first. It's in *her* that life is splendid; and a part of that is even that she's devoted to me. But she's above all magnificent in herself. So that if you'd like," she freely threw out, "to see *her—"*

"Oh I shall like to see any one who's devoted to you, for clearly it will be jolly to be 'in' it. So that if she's to be at Venice I *shall* see her?"

"We must arrange it—I shan't fail. She moreover has a friend who may also be there"—Milly found herself going on to this. "He's likely to come, I believe, for he always follows her."

Sir Luke wondered. "You mean they're lovers?"

"He is," Milly smiled; "but not she. She doesn't care for him."

Sir Luke took an interest. "What's the matter with him?"

“Nothing but that she doesn’t like him.”

Sir Luke kept it up. “Is he all right?”

“Oh he’s very nice. Indeed he’s remarkably so.”

“And he’s to be in Venice?”

“So she tells me she fears. For if he is there he’ll be constantly about with her.”

“And she’ll be constantly about with you?”

“As we’re great friends—yes.”

“Well then,” said Sir Luke, “you won’t be four women alone.”

“Oh no; I quite recognize the chance of gentlemen. But he won’t,” Milly pursued in the same wondrous way, “have come, you see, for me.”

“No—I see. But can’t you help him?”

“Can’t *you?”* Milly after a moment quaintly asked. Then for the joke of it she explained. “I’m putting you, you see, in relation with my entourage.”

It might have been for the joke of it too, by this time, that her eminent friend fell in. “But if this gentleman isn’t of your ‘entourage’? I mean if he’s of—what do you call her?—Miss Croy’s. Unless indeed you also take an interest in him.”

“Oh certainly I take an interest in him!”

“You think there may be then some chance for him?”

“I like him,” said Milly, “enough to hope so.”

“Then that’s all right. But what, pray,” Sir Luke next asked, “have I to do with him?”

“Nothing,” said Milly, “except that if you’re to be there, so may he be. And also that we shan’t in that case be simply four dreary women.”

He considered her as if at this point she a little tried his patience. “*You’re* the least ‘dreary’ woman I’ve ever, ever seen. Ever, do you know? There’s no reason why you shouldn’t have a really splendid life.”

“So every one tells me,” she promptly returned.

“The conviction—strong already when I had seen you once—is strengthened in me by having seen your friend. There’s no doubt about it. The world’s before you.”

“What did my friend tell you?” Milly asked.

“Nothing that wouldn’t have given you pleasure. We talked about you—and freely. I don’t deny that. But it shows me I don’t require of you the impossible.”

She was now on her feet. “I think I know what you require of me.”

“Nothing, for you,” he went on, “is impossible. So go on.” He repeated it again—wanting her so to feel that to-day he saw it. “You’re all right.”

“Well,” she smiled—“keep me so.”

“Oh you’ll get away from me.”

“Keep me, keep me,” she simply continued with her gentle eyes on him.

She had given him her hand for good-bye, and he thus for a moment did keep her. Something then, while he seemed to think if there were anything more, came back to him; though something of which there wasn’t too much to be made. “Of course if there’s anything I can do for your friend: I mean the gentleman you speak of—?” He gave out in short that he was ready.

“Oh Mr. Densher?” It was as if she had forgotten.

“Mr. Densher—is that his name?”

“Yes—but his case isn’t so dreadful.” She had within a minute got away from that.

“No doubt—if you take an interest.” She had got away, but it was as if he made out in her eyes—though they also had rather got away—a reason for calling her back. “Still, if there’s anything one can do—?”

She looked at him while she thought, while she smiled. “I’m afraid there’s really nothing one can do.”

—III—

Not yet so much as this morning had she felt herself sink into possession; gratefully glad that the warmth of the Southern summer was still in the high florid rooms, palatial chambers where hard cool pavements took reflexions in their lifelong polish, and where the sun on the stirred sea-water, flickering up through open windows, played over the painted “subjects” in the splendid ceilings—medallions of purple and brown, of brave old melancholy colour, medals as of old reddened gold, embossed and beribboned, all toned with time and all flourished and scalloped and gilded about, set in their great molded and figured concavity (a nest of white cherubs, friendly creatures of the air) and appreciated by the aid of that second tier of smaller lights, straight openings to the front, which did everything, even with the Baedekers and photographs of Milly’s party dreadfully meeting the eye, to make of the place an apartment of state. This at last only, though she had enjoyed the palace for three weeks, seemed to count as effective occupation; perhaps because it was the first time she had been alone—really to call alone—since she had left London, it ministered to her first full and unembarrassed sense of what the great Eugenio had done for her. The great Eugenio, recommended by grand-dukes and Americans, had entered her service during the last hours of all—had crossed from Paris, after multiplied *pourparlers* [aq] with Mrs. Stringham, to whom she had allowed more than ever a free hand, on purpose to escort her to the Continent and encompass her there, and had dedicated to her, from the moment of their meeting, all the treasures of his experience. She had judged him in advance—polyglot and universal, very dear and very deep—as probably but a swindler finished to the fingertips; for he was for ever carrying one well-kept Italian hand to his heart and plunging the other straight into her pocket, which, as she had instantly observed him to recognize, fitted it like a glove. The remarkable thing was that these elements of their common consciousness had rapidly gathered into an indestructible link, formed the ground of a happy relation; being by this time, strangely, grotesquely, delightfully, what most kept up confidence between them and what most expressed it.[19]

She had seen quickly enough what was happening—the usual thing again, yet once again. Eugenio had, in an interview of five minutes, understood her, had got hold, like all the world, of the idea not so much of the care with which she must be taken up as of the care with which she must be let down. All the world understood her, all the world had got hold; but for nobody yet, she felt, would the idea have been so close a tie or won from herself so patient a surrender. Gracefully, respectfully, consummately enough—always with hands in position and the look, in his thick neat white hair, smooth fat face and black professional, almost theatrical eyes, as of some famous tenor grown too old to make love, but with an art still to make money—did he on occasion convey to her that she was, of all the clients of his glorious career, the one in whom his interest was most personal and paternal. The others had come in the way of business, but for her his sentiment was special. Confidence rested thus on her completely believing that: there was nothing of which she felt more sure. It passed between them every time they conversed; he was abysmal, but this intimacy lived on the surface. He had taken his place already for her among those who were to see her through, and meditation ranked him, in the constant perspective, for the final function, side by side with poor Susie—whom she was now pitying more than ever for having to be herself so sorry and to say so little about it. Eugenio had the general tact of a residuary legatee—which was a character that could be definitely worn; whereas she could see Susie, in the event of her death, in no character at all, Susie being insistently, exclusively concerned in her mere makeshift duration.

This principle, for that matter, Milly at present, with a renewed flare of fancy, felt she should herself have liked to believe in. Eugenio had really done for her more than he probably knew—he didn’t after all know everything—in having, for the wind-up of the autumn, on a weak word from her, so admirably, so perfectly established her. Her weak word, as a general hint, had been: “At Venice, please, if possible, no dreadful, no vulgar hotel; but, if it can be at all managed—you know what I mean—some fine old rooms, wholly independent, for a series of months. Plenty of them too, and the more interesting the better: part of a palace, historic and picturesque, but strictly inodorous, where we shall be to ourselves, with a cook, don’t you know? —with servants, frescoes, tapestries, antiquities, the thorough make-believe of a settlement.”

The proof of how he better and better understood her was in all the lace; as to his masterly acquisition of which she had from the first asked no questions. She had shown him enough what she thought of it, and her forbearance pleased him; with the part of the transaction that mainly concerned her she would soon enough become acquainted, and his connexion with such values as she would then find noted could scarce help growing, as it were, still more residuary. Charming people, conscious Venice-lovers, evidently, had given up their house to her, and had fled to a distance, to other countries, to hide their blushes alike over what they had, however briefly, alienated, and over what they had, however durably, gained. They had preserved and

consecrated, and she now—her part of it was shameless—appropriated and enjoyed. Palazzo Leporelli [20] held its history still in its great lap, even like a painted idol, a solemn puppet hung about with decorations. Hung about with pictures and relics, the rich Venetian past, the ineffaceable character, was here the presence revered and served: which brings us back to our truth of a moment ago—the fact that, more than ever, this October morning, awkward novice though she might be, Milly moved slowly to and fro as the priestess of the worship. Certainly it came from the sweet taste of solitude, caught again and cherished for the hour; always a need of her nature, moreover, when things spoke to her with penetration. It was mostly in stillness they spoke to her best; amid voices she lost the sense. Voices had surrounded her for weeks, and she had tried to listen, had cultivated them and had answered back; these had been weeks in which there were other things they might well prevent her from hearing. More than the prospect had at first promised or threatened she had felt herself going on in a crowd and with a multiplied escort; the four ladies pictured by her to Sir Luke Strett and a phalanx comparatively closed and detached had in fact proved a rolling snowball, condemned from day to day to cover more ground. Susan Shepherd had compared this portion of the girl's excursion to the Empress Catherine's famous progress across the steps of Russia; improvised settlements appeared at each turn of the road, villagers waiting with addresses drawn up in the language of London. Old friends in fine were in ambush, Mrs. Lowder's, Kate Croy's, her own; when the addresses weren't in the language of London they were in the more insistent idioms of American centres. The current was swollen even by Susie's social connexions; so that there were days, at hotels, at Dolomite picnics, on lake steamers, when she could almost repay to Aunt Maud and Kate with interest the debt contracted by the London "success" to which they had opened the door.

Mrs. Lowder's success and Kate's, amid the shock of Milly's and Mrs. Stringham's compatriots, failed but little, really, of the concert-pitch; it had gone almost as fast as the boom, over the sea, of the last great native novel. Those ladies were "so different"—different, observably enough, from the ladies so appraising them; it being throughout a case mainly of ladies, of a dozen at once sometimes, in Milly's apartment, pointing, also at once, that moral and many others. Milly's companions were acclaimed not only as perfectly fascinating in themselves, the nicest people yet known to the acclaimers, but as obvious helping hands, socially speaking, for the eccentric young woman, evident initiators and smoothers of her path, possible subduers of her eccentricity. Short intervals, to her own sense, stood now for great differences, and this renewed inhalation of her native air had somehow left her to feel that she already, that she mainly, struck the compatriot as queer and dissociated. She moved such a critic, it would appear, as to rather an odd suspicion, a benevolence induced by a want of complete trust: all of which showed her in the light of a person too plain and too ill-clothed for a thorough good time, and yet too rich and too befriended—an intuitive cunning within her managing this last—for a thorough bad one. The compatriots, in short, by what she made out, approved her friends for their expert wisdom with her; in spite of which judicial sagacity it was the compatriots who recorded themselves as the innocent parties. She saw things in these days that she had never seen before, and she couldn't have said why save on a principle too terrible to name; whereby she saw that neither Lancaster Gate was what New York took it for, nor New York what Lancaster Gate fondly fancied it in coquetting with the plan of a series of American visits. The plan might have been, humourously, on Mrs. Lowder's part, for the improvement of her social position—and it had verily in that direction lights that were perhaps but half a century too prompt; at all of which Kate Croy assisted with the cool controlled facility that went so well, as the others said, with her particular kind of good looks, the kind that led you to expect the person enjoying them would dispose of disputations, speculations, aspirations, in a few very neatly and brightly uttered words, so simplified in sense, however, that they sounded, even when guiltless, like rather aggravated slang. It wasn't that Kate hadn't pretended too that she should like to go to America; it was only that with this young woman Milly had constantly proceeded, and more than ever of late, on the theory of intimate confessions, private frank ironies that made up for their public grimaces and amid which, face to face, they wearily put off the mask.

These puttings-off of the mask had finally quite become the form taken by their moments together, moments indeed not increasingly frequent and not prolonged, thanks to the consciousness of fatigue on Milly's side whenever, as she herself expressed it, she got out of harness. They flourished their masks, the independent pair, as they might have flourished Spanish fans; they smiled and sighed on removing them; but the gesture, the smiles, the sighs, strangely enough, might have been suspected the greatest reality in the business. Strangely enough, we say, for the volume of effusion in general would have been found by either on measurement to be scarce proportional to the paraphernalia of relief. It was when they called each other's attention to their ceasing to pretend, it was then that what they were keeping back was most in the air. There was a difference, no doubt, and mainly to Kate's advantage: Milly didn't quite see what her friend could keep back, was possessed of, in fine, that would be so subject to retention; whereas it was comparatively plain sailing for Kate that poor Milly had a treasure to hide. This was not the treasure of a shy, an abject affection—concealment, on that head, belonging to quite another phase of such states; it was much rather a principle of pride relatively bold and hard, a principle that played up like a fine steel spring at the lightest pressure of too near a football. Thus insuperably guarded was the truth about the girl's own conception of her validity; thus

was a wondering pitying sister condemned wistfully to look at her from the far side of the moat she had dug round her tower. Certain aspects of the connexion of these young women show for us, such is the twilight that gathers about them, in the likeness of some dim scene in a Maeterlinck play; we have positively the image, in the delicate dusk, of the figures so associated and yet so opposed, so mutually watchful: that of the angular pale princess, ostrich-plumed, black-robed, hung about with amulets, reminders, relics, mainly seated, mainly still, and that of the upright restless slow-circling lady of her court who exchanges with her, across the black water streaked with evening gleams, fitful questions and answers. The upright lady, with thick dark braids down her back, drawing over the grass a more embroidered train, makes the whole circuit, and makes it again, and the broken talk, brief and sparingly allusive, seems more to cover than to free their sense. This is because, when it fairly comes to not having others to consider, they meet in an air that appears rather anxiously to wait for their words. Such an impression as that was in fact grave, and might be tragic; so that, plainly enough, systematically at last, they settled to a care of what they said.

There could be no gross phrasing to Milly, in particular, of the probability that if she wasn't so proud she might be pitied with more comfort—more to the person pitying; there could be no spoken proof, no sharper demonstration than the consistently considerate attitude, that this marvelous mixture of her weakness and of her strength, her peril, if such it were, and her option, made her, kept her, irresistibly interesting. Kate's predicament in the matter was, after all, very much Mrs. Stringham's own, and Susan Shepherd herself indeed, in our Maeterlinck picture, might well have hovered in the gloaming by the moat. It may be declared for Kate, at all events, that her sincerity about her friend, through this time, was deep, her compassionate imagination strong; and that these things gave her a virtue, a good conscience, a credibility for herself, so to speak, that were later to be precious to her. She grasped with her keen intelligence the logic of their common duplicity, went unassisted through the same ordeal as Milly's other hushed follower, easily saw that for the girl to be explicit was to betray divinations, gratitudes, glimpses of the felt contrast between her fortune and her fear—all of which would have contradicted her systematic bravado. That was it, Kate wonderingly saw: to recognize was to bring down the avalanche—the avalanche Milly lived so in watch for and that might be started by the lightest of breaths; though less possibly the breath of her own stifled plaint than that of the vain sympathy, the mere helpless gaping inference of others. With so many suppressions as these, therefore, between them, their withdrawal together to unmask had to fall back, as we have hinted, on a nominal motive—which was decently represented by a joy at the drop of chatter. Chatter had in truth all along attended their steps, but they took the despairing view of it on purpose to have ready, when face to face, some view or other of something. The relief of getting out of harness—that was the moral of their meetings; but the moral of this, in turn, was that they couldn't so much as ask each other why harness need be worn. Milly wore it as a general armor.

She was out of it at present, for some reason, as she hadn't been for weeks; she was always out of it, that is, when alone, and her companions had never yet so much as just now affected her as dispersed and suppressed. It was as if still again, still more tacitly and wonderfully, Eugenio had understood her, taking it from her without a word and just bravely and brilliantly in the name, for instance, of the beautiful day: "Yes, get me an hour alone; take them off—I don't care where; absorb, amuse, detain them; drown them, kill them if you will: so that I may just a little, all by myself, see where I am." She was conscious of the dire impatience of it, for she gave up Susie as well as the others to him—Susie who would have drowned her very self for her; gave her up to a mercenary monster through whom she thus purchased respites. Strange were the turns of life and the moods of weakness; strange the flickers of fancy and the cheats of hope; yet lawful, all the same—weren't they? -those experiments tried with the truth that consisted, at the worst, but in practicing on one's self. She was now playing with the thought that Eugenio might *inclusively* assist her: he had brought home to her, and always by remarks that were really quite soundless, the conception, hitherto ungrasped, of some complete use of her wealth itself, some use of it as a counter-move to fate. It had passed between them as preposterous that with so much money she should just stupidly and awkwardly *want*—any more want a life, a career, a consciousness, than want a house, a carriage or a cook. It was as if she had had from him a kind of expert professional measure of what he was in a position, at a stretch, to undertake for her; the thoroughness of which, for that matter, she could closely compare with a looseness on Sir Luke Strett's part that—at least in Palazzo Leporelli when mornings were fine - showed as almost amateurish. Sir Luke hadn't said to her "Pay enough money and leave the rest to *me*"—which was distinctly what Eugenio did say. Sir Luke had appeared indeed to speak of purchase and payment, but in reference to a different sort of cash. Those were amounts not to be named nor reckoned, and such moreover as she wasn't sure of having at her command. Eugenio—this was the difference—could name, could reckon, and prices of his kind were things she had never suffered to scare her. She had been willing, goodness knew, to pay enough for anything, for everything, and here was simply a new view of the sufficient quantity. She amused herself—for it came to that, since Eugenio was there to sign the receipt—with possibilities of meeting the bill. She was more prepared than ever to pay enough, and quite as much as ever to pay too much. What else—if such were points at which your most trusted servant failed—was the use of being, as the dear Susies of earth called you, a princess in a palace?

She made now, alone, the full circuit of the place, noble and peaceful while the summer sea, stirring here

and there a curtain or an outer blind, breathed into its veiled spaces. She had a vision of clinging to it; that perhaps Eugenio could manage. She was in it, as in the ark of her deluge, and filled with such a tenderness for it that why shouldn't this, in common mercy, be warrant enough? She would never, never leave it—she would engage to that; would ask nothing more than to sit tight in it and float on and on. The beauty and intensity, the real momentary relief of this conceit, reached their climax in the positive purpose to put the question to Eugenio on his return as she had not yet put it; though the design, it must be added, dropped a little when, coming back to the great saloon from which she had started on her pensive progress, she found Lord Mark, of whose arrival in Venice she had been unaware, and who had now—while a servant was following her through empty rooms—been asked, in her absence, to wait. He had waited then, Lord Mark, he was waiting—oh unmistakably; never before had he so much struck her as the man to do that on occasion with patience, to do it indeed almost as with gratitude for the chance, though at the same time with a sort of notifying firmness. The odd thing, as she was afterwards to recall, was that her wonder for what had brought him was not immediate, but had come at the end of five minutes; and also, quite incoherently, that she felt almost as glad to see him, and almost as forgiving of his interruption of her solitude, as if he had already been in her thought or acting at her suggestion. He was somehow, at the best, the end of a respite; one might like him very much and yet feel that his presence tempered precious solitude more than any other known to one: in spite of all of which, as he was neither dear Susie, nor dear Kate, nor dear Aunt Maud, nor even, for the least, dear Eugenio in person, the sight of him did no damage to her sense of the dispersal of her friends. She hadn't been so thoroughly alone with him since those moments of his showing her the great portrait at Matcham, the moments that had exactly made the high-water-mark of her security, the moments during which her tears themselves, those she had been ashamed of, were the sign of her consciously rounding her protective promontory, quitting the blue gulf of comparative ignorance and reaching her view of the troubled sea. His presence now referred itself to his presence then, reminding her how kind he had been, altogether, at Matcham, and telling her, unexpectedly, at a time when she could particularly feel it, that, for such kindness and for the beauty of what they remembered together, she hadn't lost him—quite the contrary. To receive him handsomely, to receive him there, to see him interested and charmed, as well, clearly, as delighted to have found her without some other person to spoil it—these things were so pleasant for the first minutes that they might have represented on her part some happy foreknowledge.

She gave an account of her companions while he on his side failed to press her about them, even though describing his appearance, so unheralded, as the result of an impulse obeyed on the spot. He had been shivering at Carlsbad, belated there and blue, when taken by it; so that, knowing where they all were, he had simply caught the first train. He explained how he had known where they were; he had heard—what more natural?—from their friends, Milly's and his. He mentioned this betimes, but it was with his mention, singularly, that the girl became conscious of her inner question about his reason. She noticed his plural, which added to Mrs. Lowder or added to Kate; but she presently noticed also that it didn't affect her as explaining. Aunt Maud had written to him, Kate apparently—and this was interesting—had written to him; but their design presumably hadn't been that he should come and sit there as if rather relieved, so far as they were concerned, at postponements. He only said "Oh!" and again "Oh!" when she sketched their probable morning for him, under Eugenio's care and Mrs. Stringham's—sounding it quite as if any suggestion that he should overtake them at the Rialto or the Bridge of Sighs would leave him temporarily cold. This precisely it was that, after a little, operated for Milly as an obscure but still fairly direct check to confidence. He had known where they all were from the others, but it was not for the others that, in his actual dispositions, he had come. That, strange to say, was a pity; for, stranger still to say, she could have shown him more confidence if he himself had had less intention. His intention so chilled her, from the moment she found herself divining it, that, just for the pleasure of going on with him fairly, just for the pleasure of their remembrance together of Matcham and the Bronzino, the climax of her fortune, she could have fallen to pleading with him and to reasoning, to undeceiving him in time. There had been, for ten minutes, with the directness of her welcome to him and the way this clearly pleased him, something of the grace of amends made, even though he couldn't know it-amends for her not having been originally sure, for instance at that first dinner of Aunt Maud's, that he was adequately human. That first dinner of Aunt Maud's added itself to the hour at Matcham, added itself to other things, to consolidate, for her present benevolence, the ease of their relation, making it suddenly delightful that he had thus turned up. He exclaimed, as he looked about, on the charm of the place: "What a temple to taste and an expression of the pride of life, yet, with all that, what a jolly *home!-so* that, for his entertainment, she could offer to walk him about though she mentioned that she had just been, for her own purposes, in a general prowl, taking everything in more susceptibly than before. He embraced her offer without a scruple and seemed to rejoice that he was to find her susceptible.

—IV—

She couldn't have said what it was, in the conditions, that renewed the whole solemnity, but by the end of twenty minutes a kind of wistful hush had fallen upon them, as before something poignant in which her visitor also participated. That was nothing verily but the perfection of the charm—or nothing rather but their excluded disinherited state in the presence of it. The charm turned on them a face that was cold in its beauty, that was full of a poetry never to be theirs, that spoke with an ironic smile of a possible but forbidden life. It all rolled afresh over Milly: "Oh the impossible romance—!" The romance for her, yet once more, would be to sit there for ever, through all her time, as in a fortress; and the idea became an image of never going down, of remaining aloft in the divine dustless air, where she would hear but the splash of the water against stone. The great floor on which they moved was at an altitude, and this prompted the rueful fancy. "Ah not to go down—never, never to go down!" she strangely sighed to her friend.

"But why shouldn't you," he asked, "with that tremendous old staircase in your court? There ought of course always to be people at top and bottom, in Veronese[ar] costumes, to watch you do it."

She shook her head both lightly and mournfully enough at his not understanding. "Not even for people in Veronese costumes. I mean that the positive beauty is that one needn't go down. I don't move in fact," she added—"now. I've not been out, you know. I stay up. That's how you happily found me."

Lord Mark wondered—he was, oh yes, adequately human. "You don't go about?"

She looked over the place, the story above the apartments in which she had received him, the sala corresponding to the sala below and fronting the great canal with its gothic arches. The casements between the arches were open, the ledge of the balcony broad, the sweep of the canal, so overhung, admirable, and the flutter toward them of the loose white curtain an invitation to she scarce could have said what. But there was no mystery after a moment; she had never felt so invited to anything as to make that, and that only, just where she was, her adventure. It would be—to this it kept coming back—the adventure of not stirring. "I go about just here."

"Do you mean," Lord Mark presently asked, "that you're really not well?"

They were at the window, pausing, lingering, with the fine old faded palaces opposite and the slow Adriatic tide beneath; but after a minute, and before she answered, she had closed her eyes to what she saw and unresistingly dropped her face into her arms, which rested on the coping. She had fallen to her knees on the cushion of the window-place, and she leaned there, in a long silence, with her forehead down. She knew that her silence was itself too straight an answer, but it was beyond her now to say that she saw her way. She would have made the question itself impossible to others—impossible for example to such a man as Merton Densher; and she could wonder even on the spot what it was a sign of in her feeling for Lord Mark that from his lips it almost tempted her to break down. This was doubtless really because she cared for him so little; to let herself go with him thus, suffer his touch to make her cup overflow, would be the relief—since it was actually, for her nerves, a question of relief—that would cost her least. If he had come to her moreover with the intention she believed, or even if this intention had but been determined in him by the spell of their situation, he mustn't be mistaken about her value—for what value did she now have? It throbbed within her as she knelt there that she had none at all; though, holding herself, not yet speaking, she tried, even in the act, to recover what might be possible of it. With that there came to her a light: wouldn't her value, for the man who should marry her, be precisely in the ravage of her disease? She mightn't last, but her money would. For a man in whom the vision of her money should be intense, in whom it should be most of the ground for "making up" to her, any prospective failure on her part to be long for this world might easily count as a positive attraction. Such a man, proposing to please, persuade, secure her, appropriate her for such a time, shorter or longer, as nature and the doctors should allow, would make the best of her, ill, damaged, disagreeable though she might be, for the sake of eventual benefits: she being clearly a person of the sort esteemed likely to do the handsome thing by a stricken and sorrowing husband.

She had said to herself betimes, in a general way, that whatever habits her youth might form, that of seeing an interested suitor in every bush should certainly never grow to be one of them—an attitude she had early judged as ignoble, as poisonous. She had had accordingly in fact as little to do with it as possible and she scarce knew why at the present moment she should have had to catch herself in the act of imputing an ugly motive. It didn't sit, the ugly motive, in Lord Mark's cool English eyes; the darker side of it at any rate showed, to her imagination, but briefly. Suspicion moreover, with this, simplified itself: there was a beautiful reason—indeed there were two—why her companion's motive shouldn't matter. One was that even should he desire her without a penny she wouldn't marry him for the world; the other was that she felt him, after all, perceptively, kindly, very pleasantly and humanly, concerned for her. They were also two things, his wishing to be well, to be very well, with her, and his beginning to feel her as threatened, haunted, blighted; but they were melting together for him, making him, by their combination, only the more sure that, as he probably called it to himself, he liked her. That was presently what remained with her—his really doing it; and with the natural and proper incident of being conciliated by her weakness. Would she really have had him—she could ask herself that—disconcerted or disgusted by it? If he could only be touched enough to do what she

preferred, not to raise, not to press any question, he might render her a much better service than by merely enabling her to refuse him. Again, again it was strange, but he figured to her for the moment as the one safe sympathizer. It would have made her worse to talk to others, but she wasn't afraid with him of how he might wince and look pale. She would keep him, that is, her one easy relation—in the sense of easy for himself. Their actual outlook had meanwhile such charm, what surrounded them within and without did so much toward making appreciative stillness as natural as at the opera, that she could consider she hadn't made him hang on her lips when at last, instead of saying if she were well or ill, she repeated: "I go about here. I don't get tired of it. I never should—it suits me so. I adore the place," she went on, "and I don't want in the least to give it up."

"Neither should I if I had your luck. Still, with that luck, for one's *all*—! Should you positively like to live here?"

"I think I should like," said poor Milly after an instant, "to die here."

Which made him, precisely, laugh. That was what she wanted—when a person did care: it was the pleasant human way, without depths of darkness. "Oh it's not good enough for *that!* That requires picking. But can't you keep it? It is, you know, the sort of place to see you in; you carry out the note, fill it, people it, quite by yourself, and you might do much worse—I mean for your friends—than show yourself here a while, three or four months, every year. But it's not my notion for the rest of the time. One has quite other uses for you."

"What sort of a use for me is it," she smilingly inquired, "to kill me?"

"Do you mean we should kill you in England?"

"Well, I've seen you and I'm afraid. You're too much for me— too many. England bristles with questions. This is more, as you say there, my form."

"Oho, oho!"—he laughed again as if to humour her. "Can't you then buy it—for a price? Depend upon it they'll treat for money. That is for money enough."

"I've exactly," she said, "been wondering if they won't. I think I shall try. But if I get it I shall cling to it." They were talking sincerely. "It will be my life—paid for as that. It will become my great gilded shell; so that those who wish to find me must come and hunt me up."

"Ah then you will be alive," said Lord Mark.

"Well, not quite extinct perhaps, but shrunken, wasted, wizened; rattling about here like the dried kernel of a nut."

"Oh," Lord Mark returned, "we, much as you mistrust us, can do better for you than that."

"In the sense that you'll feel it better for me really to have it over?"

He let her see now that she worried him, and after a look at her, of some duration, without his glasses—which always altered the expression of his eyes—he re-settled the nippers[as] on his nose and went back to the view. But the view, in turn, soon enough released him. "Do you remember something I said to you that day at Matcham—or at least fully meant to?"

"Oh yes, I remember everything at Matcham. It's another life."

"Certainly it will be—I mean the kind of thing: what I then wanted it to represent for you. Matcham, you know," he continued, "is symbolic. I think I tried to rub that into you a little."

She met him with the full memory of what he had tried—not an inch, not an ounce of which was lost to her. "What I meant is that it seems a hundred years ago."

"Oh for me it comes in better. Perhaps a part of what makes me remember it," he pursued, "is that I was quite aware of what might have been said about what I was doing. I wanted you to take it from me that I should perhaps be able to look after you—will, rather better. Rather better, of course, than certain other persons in particular."

"Precisely—than Mrs. Lowder, than Miss Croy, even than Mrs. Stringham."

"Oh Mrs. Stringham's all right!" Lord Mark promptly amended.

It amused her even with what she had else to think of; and she could show him at all events how little, in spite of the hundred years, she had lost what he alluded to. The way he was with her at this moment made in fact the other moment so vivid as almost to start again the tears it had started at the time. "You could do so much for me, yes. I perfectly understood you."

"I wanted you see," he despite this explained, "to *fix* your confidence. I mean, you know, in the right

place."

"Well, Lord Mark, you did—it's just exactly now, my confidence, where you put it then. The only difference," said Milly, "is that I seem now to have no use for it. Besides," she then went on, "I do seem to feel you disposed to act in a way that would undermine it a little."

He took no more notice of these last words than if she hadn't said them, only watching her at present as with a gradual new light. "Are you *really* in any trouble?"

To this, on her side, she gave no heed. Making out his light was a little a light for herself. "Don't say, don't try to say, anything that's impossible. There are much better things you can do."

He looked straight at it and then straight over it. "It's too monstrous that one can't ask you as a friend what one wants so to know."

"What is it you want to know?" She spoke, as by a sudden turn, with a slight hardness. "Do you want to know if I'm badly ill?"

The sound of it in truth, though from no raising of her voice, invested the idea with a kind of terror, but a terror all for others. Lord Mark winced and flushed—clearly couldn't help it; but he kept his attitude together and spoke even with unwonted vivacity. "Do you imagine I can see you suffer and not say a word?"

"You won't see me suffer—don't be afraid. I shan't be a public nuisance. That's why I should have liked this: it's so beautiful in itself and yet it's out of the gangway. You won't know anything about anything," she added; and then as if to make with decision an end: "And you *don't*! No, not even you." He faced her through it with the remains of his expression, and she saw him as clearly—for *him* - bewildered; which made her wish to be sure not to have been unkind. She would be kind once for all; that would be the end. "I'm very badly ill."

"And you don't do anything?"

"I do everything. Everything's *this,"* she smiled. "I'm doing it now. One can't do more than live."

"Oh live!" Lord Mark ejaculated.

"Well, it's immense for *me."* She finally spoke as if for amusement ; now that she had uttered her truth, that he had learnt it from herself as no one had yet done, her emotion had, by the fact, dried up. There she was; but it was as if she would never speak again. "I shan't," she added, "have missed everything."

"Why should you have missed *anything?"* She felt, as he sounded this, to what, within the minute, he had made up his mind. "You're the person in the world for whom that's least necessary; for whom one would call it in fact most impossible; for whom 'missing' at all will surely require an extraordinary amount of misplaced good will. Since you believe in advice, for God's sake take *mine*. I know what you want."

Oh she knew he would know it. But she had brought it on herself—or almost. Yet she spoke with kindness. "I think I want not to be too much worried."

"You want to be adored." It came at last straight. "Nothing would worry you less. I mean as I shall do it. It is so"—he firmly kept it up. "You're not loved enough."

"Enough for what, Lord Mark?"

"Why to get the full good of it."

Well, she didn't after all mock at him. "I see what you mean. That full good of it which consists in finding one's self forced to love in return." She had grasped it, but she hesitated. "Your idea is that I might find myself forced to love *you?"*

"Oh 'forced'—!" He was so fine and so expert, so awake to anything the least ridiculous, and of a type with which the preaching of passion somehow so ill consorted—he was so much all these things that he had absolutely to take account of them himself. And he did so, in a single intonation, beautifully. Milly liked him again, liked him for such shades as that, liked him so that it was woeful to see him spoiling it, and still more woeful to have to rank him among those minor charms of existence that she gasped at moments to remember she must give up. "Is it inconceivable to you that you might try?"

"To be so favorably affected by you—?"

"To believe in me. To believe in me," Lord Mark repeated.

Again she hesitated. "To 'try' in return for your trying?"

"Oh I shouldn't have to!" he quickly declared. The prompt neat accent, however, his manner of disposing

of her question, failed of real expression, as he himself the next moment intelligently, helplessly, almost comically saw—a failure pointed moreover by the laugh into which Milly was immediately startled. As a suggestion to her of a healing and uplifting passion it was in truth deficient; it wouldn't do as the communication of a force that should sweep them both away. And the beauty of him was that he too, even in the act of persuasion, of self-persuasion, could understand that, and could thereby show but the better as fitting into the pleasant commerce of prosperity. The way she let him see that she looked at him was a thing to shut him out, of itself, from services of danger, a thing that made a discrimination against him never yet made—made at least to any consciousness of his own. Born to float in a sustaining air, this would be his first encounter with a judgement formed in the sinister light of tragedy. The gathering dusk of her personal world presented itself to him, in her eyes, as an element in which it was vain for him to pretend he could find himself at home, since it was charged with depressions and with dooms, with the chill of the losing game. Almost without her needing to speak, and simply by the fact that there could be, in such a case, no decent substitute for a felt intensity, he had to take it from her that practically he was afraid -whether afraid to protest falsely enough, or only afraid of what might be eventually disagreeable in a compromised alliance, being a minor question. She believed she made out besides, wonderful girl, that he had never quite expected to have to protest about anything beyond his natural convenience—more, in fine, than his disposition and habits, his education as well, his personal moyens,[at] in short, permitted.

His predicament was therefore one he couldn't like, and also one she willingly would have spared him hadn't he brought it on himself. No man, she was quite aware, could enjoy thus having it from her that he wasn't good for what she would have called her reality. It wouldn't have taken much more to enable her positively to make out in him that he was virtually capable of hinting—had his innermost feeling spoken—at the propriety rather, in his interest, of some cutting down, some dressing up, of the offensive real. He would meet that halfway, but the real must also meet *him.* Milly's sense of it for herself, which was so conspicuously, so financially supported, couldn't, or wouldn't, so accommodate him, and the perception of that fairly showed in his face after a moment like the smart of a blow. It had marked the one minute during which he could again be touching to her. By the time he had tried once more, after all, to insist, he had quite ceased to be so.

By this time she had turned from their window to make a diversion, had walked him through other rooms, appealing again to the inner charm of the place, going even so far for that purpose as to point afresh her independent moral, to repeat that if one only had such a house for one's own and loved it and cherished it enough, it would pay one back in kind, would close one in from harm. He quite grasped for the quarter of an hour the perch she held out to him—grasped it with one hand, that is, while she felt him attached to his own clue with the other; he was by no means either so sore or so stupid, to do him all justice, as not to be able to behave more or less as if nothing had happened. It was one of his merits, to which she did justice too, that both his native and his acquired notion of behaviour rested on the general assumption that nothing—nothing to make a deadly difference for him—ever *could* happen. It was, socially, a working view like another, and it saw them easily enough through the greater part of the rest of their adventure. Downstairs again, however, with the limit of his stay in sight, the sign of his smarting, when all was said, reappeared for her—breaking out moreover, with an effect of strangeness, in another quite possibly sincere allusion to her state of health. He might for that matter have been seeing what he could do in the way of making it a grievance that she should snub him for a charity, on his own part, exquisitely roused. "It's true, you know, all the same, and I don't care a straw for your trying to freeze one up." He seemed to show her, poor man, bravely, how little he cared. "Everybody knows affection often makes things out when indifference doesn't notice. And that's why I know that I notice."

"Are you sure you've got it right?" the girl smiled. "I thought rather that affection was supposed to be blind."

"Blind to faults, not to beauties," Lord Mark promptly returned.

"And are my extremely private worries, my entirely domestic complications, which I'm ashamed to have given you a glimpse of—are they beauties?"

"Yes, for those who care for you—as every one does. Everything about you is a beauty. Besides which I don't believe," he declared, "in the seriousness of what you tell me. It's too absurd you should have *any* trouble about which something can't be done. If you can't get the right thing, who *can,* in all the world, I should like to know? You're the first young woman of your time. I mean what I say." He looked, to do him justice, quite as if he did; not ardent, but clear—simply so competent, in such a position, to compare, that his quiet assertion had the force not so much perhaps of a tribute as of a warrant. "We're all in love with you. I'll put it that way, dropping any claim of my own, if you can bear it better. I speak as one of the lot. You weren't born simply to torment us—you were born to make us happy. Therefore you must listen to us."

She shook her head with her slowness, but this time with all her mildness. "No, I mustn't listen to you—that's just what I mustn't do. The reason is, please, that it simply kills me. I must be as attached to you as you will, since you give that lovely account of yourselves. I give you in return the fullest possible belief of what it

would be—" And she pulled up a little. "I give and give and give—there you are; stick to me as close as you like and see if I don't. Only I can't listen or receive or accept—I can't *agree*. I can't make a bargain. I can't really. You must believe that from me. It's all I've wanted to say to you, and why should it spoil anything?"

He let her question fall—though clearly, it might have seemed, because, for reasons or for none, there was so much that was spoiled. "You want somebody of your own." He came back, whether in good faith or in bad, to that; and it made her repeat her headshake. He kept it up as if his faith were of the best. "You want somebody, you want somebody."

She was to wonder afterwards if she hadn't been at this juncture on the point of saying something emphatic and vulgar—"Well, I don't at all events want *you!"* What somehow happened, nevertheless, the pity of it being greater than the irritation—the sadness, to her vivid sense, of his being so painfully astray, wandering in a desert in which there was nothing to nourish him—was that his error amounted to positive wrongdoing. She was moreover so acquainted with quite another sphere of usefulness for him that her having suffered him to insist almost convicted her of indelicacy. Why hadn't she stopped him off with her first impression of his purpose? She could do so now only by the allusion she had been wishing not to make. "Do you know I don't think you're doing very right?—and as a thing quite apart, I mean, from my listening to you. That's not right either—except that I'm not listening. You oughtn't to have come to Venice to see *me*—and in fact you've not come, and you mustn't behave as if you had. You've much older friends than I, and ever so much better. Really, if you've come at all, you can only have come—properly, and if I may say so honourably—for the best friend, as I believe her to be, that you have in the world."

When once she had said it he took it, oddly enough, as if he had been more or less expecting it. Still, he looked at her very hard, and they had a moment of this during which neither pronounced a name, each apparently determined that the other should. It was Milly's fine coercion, in the event, that was the stronger. "Miss Croy?" Lord Mark asked.

It might have been difficult to make out that she smiled. "Mrs. Lowder." He did make out something, and then fairly coloured for its attestation of his comparative simplicity. "I call her on the whole the best. I can't imagine a man's having a better."

Still with his eyes on her he turned it over. "Do you want me to marry Mrs. Lowder?"

At which it seemed to her that it was he who was almost vulgar! But she wouldn't in any way have that. "You know, Lord Mark, what I mean. One isn't in the least turning you out into the cold world. There's no cold world for you at all, I think," she went on; "nothing but a very warm and watchful and expectant world that's waiting for you at any moment you choose to take it up."

He never budged, but they were standing on the polished concrete and he had within a few minutes possessed himself again of his hat. "Do you want me to marry Kate Croy?"

"Mrs. Lowder wants it—I do no wrong, I think, in saying that; and she understands moreover that you know she does."

Well, he showed how beautifully he could take it; and it wasn't obscure to her, on her side, that it was a comfort to deal with a gentleman. "It's ever so kind of you to see such opportunities for me. But what's the use of my tackling Miss Croy?"

Milly rejoiced on the spot to be so able to point out. "Because she's the handsomest and cleverest and most charming creature I ever saw, and because if I were a man I should simply adore her. In fact I do as it is." It was a luxury of response.

"Oh, my dear lady, plenty of people adore her. But that can't further the case of *all."*

"Ah," she went on, "I know about 'people.' If the case of one's bad, the case of another's good. I don't see what you have to fear from any one else," she said, "save through your being foolish, this way, about *me*."

So she said, but she was aware the next moment of what he was making of what she didn't see. "Is it your idea—since we're talking of these things in these ways—that the young lady you describe in such superlative terms is to be had for the asking?"

"Well, Lord Mark, try. She is a great person. But don't be humble." She was almost gay.

It was this apparently, at last, that was too much for him. "But don't you really *know?"*

As a challenge, practically, to the commonest intelligence she could pretend to, it made her of course wish to be fair. "I 'know,' yes, that a particular person's very much in love with her."

"Then you must know by the same token that she's very much in love with a particular person."

“Ah I beg your pardon!”—and Milly quite flushed at having so crude a blunder imputed to her. “You’re wholly mistaken.”

“It’s not true?”

“It’s not true.”

His stare became a smile. “Are you very, very sure?”

“As sure as one can be”—and Milly’s manner could match it—“when one has every assurance. I speak on the best authority.”

He hesitated. “Mrs. Lowder’s?”

“No. I don’t call Mrs. Lowder’s the best.”

“Oh I thought you were just now saying,” he laughed, “that everything about her’s so good.”

“Good for you”—she was perfectly clear. “For you,” she went on, “let her authority be the best. She doesn’t believe what you mention, and you must know yourself how little she makes of it. So you can take it from her. *I* take it—” But Milly, with the positive tremor of her emphasis, pulled up.

“You take it from Kate?”

“From Kate herself.”

“That she’s thinking of no one at all?”

“Of no one at all.” Then, with her intensity, she went on. “She has given me her word for it.”

“Oh!” said Lord Mark. To which he next added: “And what do you call her word?”

It made Milly, on her side, stare—though perhaps partly but with the instinct of gaining time for the consciousness that she was already a little further “in” than she had designed. “Why, Lord Mark, what should *you* call her word?”

“Ah I’m not obliged to say. I’ve not asked her. You apparently have.”

Well, it threw her on her defence—a defence that she felt, however, especially as of Kate. “We’re very intimate,” she said in a moment; “so that, without prying into each other’s affairs, she naturally tells me things.”

Lord Mark smiled as at a lame conclusion. “You mean then she made you of her own movement the declaration you quote?”

Milly thought again, though with hindrance rather than help in her sense of the way their eyes now met—met as for their each seeing in the other more than either said. What she most felt that she herself saw was the strange disposition on her companion’s part to disparage Kate’s veracity. She could be only concerned to “stand up” for that.

“I mean what I say: that when she spoke of her having no private interest—”

“She took her oath to you?” Lord Mark interrupted.

Milly didn’t quite see why he should so catechise her; but she met it again for Kate. “She left me in no doubt whatever of her being free.”

At this Lord Mark did look at her, though he continued to smile. “And thereby in no doubt of *your* being too?” It was as if as soon as he had said it, however, he felt it as something of a mistake, and she couldn’t herself have told by what queer glare at him she had instantly signified that. He at any rate gave her glare no time to act further; he fell back on the spot, and with a light enough movement, within his rights. “That’s all very well, but why in the world, dear lady, should she be swearing to you?”

She had to take this “dear lady” as applying to herself; which disconcerted her when he might now so gracefully have used it for the aspersed Kate. Once more it came to her that she must claim her own part of the aspersion. “Because, as I’ve told you, we’re such tremendous friends.”

“Oh,” said Lord Mark, who for the moment looked as if that might have stood rather for an absence of such rigors. He was going, however, as if he had in a manner, at the last, got more or less what he wanted. Milly felt, while he addressed his next few words to leave-taking, that she had given rather more than she intended or than she should be able, when once more getting herself into hand, theoretically to defend. Strange enough in fact that he had had from her, about herself—and, under the searching spell of the place, infinitely straight—what no one else had had: neither Kate, nor Aunt Maud, nor Merton Densher, nor Susan Shepherd. He had

made her within a minute, in particular, she was aware, lose her presence of mind, and she now wished he would take himself off, so that she might either recover it or bear the loss better in solitude. If he paused, however, she almost at the same time saw, it was because of his watching the approach, from the end of the sala, of one of the gondoliers, who, whatever excursions were appointed for the party with the attendance of the others, always, as the most decorative, most sashed and starched, remained at the palace on the theory that she might whimsically want him—which she never, in her caged freedom, had yet done. Brown Pasquale, slipping in white shoes over the marble and suggesting to her perpetually charmed vision she could scarce say what, either a mild Hindoo, too noiseless almost for her nerves, or simply a bare-footed seaman on the deck of a ship—Pasquale offered to sight a small salver, which he obsequiously held out to her with its burden of a visiting-card. Lord Mark—and as if also for admiration of him—delayed his departure to let her receive it; on which she read it with the instant effect of another blow to her presence of mind. This precarious quantity was indeed now so gone that even for dealing with Pasquale she had to do her best to conceal its disappearance. The effort was made, none the less, by the time she had asked if the gentleman were below and had taken in the fact that he had come up. He had followed the gondolier and was waiting at the top of the staircase.

“I’ll see him with pleasure.” To which she added for her companion, while Pasquale went off: “Mr. Merton Densher.”

“Oh!” said Lord Mark—in a manner that, making it resound through the great cool hall, might have carried it even to Densher’s ear as a judgement of his identity heard and noted once before.

BOOK EIGHTH

—I—

Densher became aware, afresh, that he disliked his hotel—and all the more promptly that he had had occasion of old to make the same discrimination. The establishment, choked at that season with the polyglot herd, cockneys of all climes, mainly German, mainly American, mainly English, it appeared as the corresponding sensitive nerve was touched, sounded loud and now sweet, sounded anything and everything but Italian, but Venetian. The Venetian was all a dialect, he knew; yet it was pure Attic beside some of the dialects at the bustling inn. It made, “abroad,” both for his pleasure and his pain that he had to feel at almost any point how he had been through everything before. He had been three or four times, in Venice, during other visits, through this pleasant irritation of paddling away—away from the concert of false notes in the vulgarized hall, away from the amiable American families and overfed German porters. He had in each case made terms for a lodging more private and not more costly, and he recalled with tenderness these shabby but friendly asylums, the windows of which he should easily know again in passing on canal or through campo. The shabbiest now failed of an appeal to him, but he found himself at the end of forty-eight hours forming views in respect to a small independent *quartiere,*[au] far down the Grand Canal, which he had once occupied for a month with a sense of pomp and circumstance and yet also with a growth of initiation into the homelier Venetian mysteries. The humour of those days came back to him for an hour, and what further befell in this interval, to be brief, was that, emerging on a traghetto[av] in sight of the recognized house, he made out on the green shutters of his old, of his young windows the strips of white pasted paper that figure in Venice as an invitation to tenants. This was in the course of his very first walk apart, a walk replete with impressions to which he responded with force. He had been almost without cessation, since his arrival, at Palazzo Leporelli, where, as happened, a turn of bad weather on the second day had kept the whole party continuously at home. The episode had passed for him like a series of hours in a museum, though without the fatigue of that; and it had also resembled something that he was still, with a stirred imagination, to find a name for. He might have been looking for the name while he gave himself up, subsequently, to the ramble—he saw that even after years he couldn’t lose his way—crowned with his stare across the water at the little white papers.

He was to dine at the palace in an hour or two, and he had lunched there, at an early luncheon, that morning. He had then been out with the three ladies, the three being Mrs. Lowder, Mrs. Stringham and Kate, and had kept afloat with them, under a sufficient Venetian spell, until Aunt Maud had directed him to leave them and return to Miss Theale. Of two circumstances connected with this disposition of his person he was even now not unmindful; the first being that the lady of Lancaster Gate had addressed him with high publicity and as if expressing equally the sense of her companions, who had not spoken, but who might have been taken—yes, Susan Shepherd quite equally with Kate—for inscrutable parties to her plan. What he could as little contrive to forget was that he had, before the two others, as it struck him—that was to say especially before Kate—done exactly as he was bidden, gathered himself up without a protest and retraced his way to the palace. Present with him still was the question of whether he looked a fool for it, of whether the awkwardness he felt as the gondola rocked with the business of his leaving it—they could but make, in submission, for a landing-place that was none of the best—had furnished his friends with such entertainment as was to cause them, behind his back, to exchange intelligent smiles. He had found Milly Theale twenty minutes later alone, and he had sat with her till the others returned to tea. The strange part of this was that it had been very easy, extraordinarily easy. He knew it for strange only when he was away from her, because when he was away from her he was in contact with particular things that made it so. At the time, in her presence, it was as simple as sitting with his sister might have been, and not, if the point were urged, very much more thrilling. He continued to see her as he had first seen her—that remained ineffaceably behind. Mrs. Lowder, Susan Shepherd, his own Kate, might, each in proportion, see her as a princess, as an angel, as a star, but for himself, luckily, she hadn’t as yet complications to any point of discomfort: the princess, the angel, the star, were muffled over, ever so lightly and brightly, with the little American girl who had been kind to him in New York and to whom certainly—though without making too much of it for either of them—he was perfectly willing to be kind in return. She appreciated his coming in on purpose, but there was nothing in that—from the moment she was always at home—that they couldn’t easily keep up. The only note the least bit high that had even yet sounded between them was this admission on her part that she found it best to remain within. She wouldn’t let him call it keeping quiet, for she insisted that her palace—with all its romance and art and history—had set up round her a whirlwind of suggestion that never dropped for an hour.

It wasn't therefore, within such walls, confinement, it was the freedom of all the centuries: in respect to which Densher granted good-humouredly that they were then blown together, she and he, as much as she liked, through space.

Kate had found on the present occasion a moment to say to him that he suggested a clever cousin calling on a cousin afflicted, and bored for his pains; and though he denied on the spot the "bored" he could so far see it as an impression he might make that he wondered if the same image wouldn't have occurred to Milly. As soon as Kate appeared again the difference came up—the oddity, as he then instantly felt it, of his having sunk so deep. It was sinking because it was all doing what Kate had conceived for him; it wasn't in the least doing—and that had been his notion of his life—anything he himself had conceived. The difference, accordingly, renewed, sharp, sore, was the irritant under which he had quitted the palace and under which he was to make the best of the business of again dining there. He said to himself that he must make the best of everything; that was in his mind, at the traghetto, even while, with his preoccupation about changing quarters, he studied, across the canal, the look of his former abode. It had done for the past, would it do for the present? would it play in any manner into the general necessity of which he was conscious? That necessity of making the best was the instinct—as he indeed himself knew—of a man somehow aware that if he let go at one place he should let go everywhere. If he took off his hand, the hand that at least helped to hold it together, the whole queer fabric that built him in would fall away in a minute and admit the light. It was really a matter of nerves; it was exactly because he was nervous that he could go straight; yet if that condition should increase he must surely go wild. He was walking in short on a high ridge, steep down on either side, where the proprieties—once he could face at all remaining there—reduced themselves to his keeping his head. It was Kate who had so perched him, and there came up for him at moments, as he found himself planting one foot exactly before another, a sensible sharpness of irony as to her management of him. It wasn't that she had put him in danger—to be in real danger with her would have had another quality. There glowed for him in fact a kind of rage at what he wasn't having; an exasperation, a resentment, begotten truly by the very impatience of desire, in respect to his postponed and relegated, his so extremely manipulated state. It was beautifully done of her, but what was the real meaning of it unless that he was perpetually bent to her will? His idea from the first, from the very first of his knowing her, had been to be, as the French called it, *bon prince*[aw] with her, mindful of the good humour and generosity, the contempt, in the matter of confidence, for small outlays and small savings, that belonged to the man who wasn't generally afraid. There were things enough, goodness knew—for it was the moral of his plight—that he couldn't afford; but what had had a charm for him if not the notion of living handsomely, to make up for it, in another way? of not at all events reading the romance of his existence in a cheap edition. All he had originally felt in her came back to him, was indeed actually as present as ever—how he had admired and envied what he called to himself her pure talent for life, as distinguished from his own, a poor weak thing of the occasion, amateurishly patched up; only it irritated him the more that this was exactly what was now, ever so characteristically, standing out in her.

It was thanks to her pure talent for life, verily, that he was just where he was and that he was above all just how he was. The proof of a decent reaction in him against so much passivity was, with no great richness, that he at least knew—knew, that is, how he was, and how little he liked it as a thing accepted in mere helplessness. He was, for the moment, wistful—that above all described it; that was so large a part of the force that, as the autumn afternoon closed in, kept him, on his traghetto, positively throbbing with his question. His question connected itself, even while he stood, with his special smothered soreness, his sense almost of shame; and the soreness and the shame were less as he let himself, with the help of the conditions about him, regard it as serious. It was born, for that matter, partly of the conditions, those conditions that Kate had so almost insolently braved, had been willing, without a pang, to see him ridiculously—ridiculously so far as just complacently-exposed to. How little it could be complacently he was to feel with the last thoroughness before he had moved from his point of vantage. His question, as we have called it, was the interesting question of whether he had really no will left. How could he know—that was the point—without putting the matter to the test? It had been right to be *bon prince,* and the joy, something of the pride, of having lived, in spirit, handsomely, was even now compatible with the impulse to look into their account; but he held his breath a little as it came home to him with supreme sharpness that, whereas he had done absolutely everything that Kate had wanted, she had done nothing whatever that he had. So it was in fine that his idea of the test by which he must try that possibility kept referring itself, in the warm early dusk, the approach of the Southern night—"conditions" these, such as we just spoke of—to the glimmer, more and more ghostly as the light failed, of the little white papers on his old green shutters. By the time he looked at his watch he had been for a quarter of an hour at this post of observation and reflexion; but by the time he walked away again he had found his answer to the idea that had grown so importunate. Since a proof of his will was wanted it was indeed very exactly in wait for him—it lurked there on the other side of the Canal. A ferryman at the little pier had from time to time accosted him; but it was a part of the play of his nervousness to turn his back on that facility. He would go over, but he walked, very quickly, round and round, crossing finally by the Rialto. The rooms, in the event, were unoccupied; the ancient padrona was there with her smile all a radiance but her

recognition all a fable; the ancient rickety objects too, refined in their shabbiness, amiable in their decay, as to which, on his side, demonstrations were tenderly veracious; so that before he took his way again he had arranged to come in on the morrow.

He was amusing about it that evening at dinner—in spite of an odd first impulse, which at the palace quite melted away, to treat it merely as a matter for his own satisfaction. This need, this propriety, he had taken for granted even up to the moment of suddenly perceiving, in the course of talk, that the incident would minister to innocent gaiety. Such was quite its effect, with the aid of his picture—an evocation of the quaint, of the humblest rococo, of a Venetian interior in the true old note. He made the point for his hostess that her own high chambers, though they were a thousand grand things, weren't really this; made it in fact with such success that she presently declared it his plain duty to invite her on some near day to tea. She had expressed as yet—he could feel it as felt among them all—no such clear wish to go anywhere, not even to make an effort for a parish feast, or an autumn sunset, nor to descend her staircase for Titan or Gianbellini. It was constantly Densher's view that, as between himself and Kate, things were understood without saying, so that he could catch in her, as she but too freely could in him, innumerable signs of it, the whole soft breath of consciousness meeting and promoting consciousness. This view was so far justified to-night as that Milly's offer to him of her company was to his sense taken up by Kate in spite of her doing nothing to show it. It fell in so perfectly with what she had desired and foretold that she was—and this was what most struck him—sufficiently gratified and blinded by it not to know, from the false quality of his response, from his tone and his very look, which for an instant instinctively sought her own, that he had answered inevitably, almost shamelessly, in a mere time-gaining sense. It gave him on the spot, her failure of perception, almost a beginning of the advantage he had been planning for—that is at least if she too were not darkly dishonest. She might, he was not unaware, have made out, from some deep part of her, the bearing, in respect to herself, of the little fact he had announced; for she was after all capable of that, capable of guessing and yet of simultaneously hiding her guess. It wound him up a turn or two further, none the less, to impute to her now a weakness of vision by which he could himself feel the stronger. Whatever apprehension of his motive in shifting his abode might have brushed her with its wings, she at all events certainly didn't guess that he was giving their friend a hollow promise. That was what she had herself imposed on him; there had been in the prospect from the first a definite particular point at which hollowness, to call it by its least compromising name, would have to begin. Therefore its hour had now charmingly sounded.

Whatever in life he had recovered his old rooms for, he had not recovered them to receive Milly Theale: which made no more difference in his expression of happy readiness than if he had been—just what he was trying not to be—fully hardened and fully base. So rapid in fact was the rhythm of his inward drama that the quick vision of impossibility produced in him by his hostess's direct and unexpected appeal had the effect, slightly sinister, of positively scaring him. It gave him a measure of the intensity, the reality of his now mature motive. It prompted in him certainly no quarrel with these things, but it made them as vivid as if they already flushed with success. It was before the flush of success that his heart beat almost to dread. The dread was but the dread of the happiness to be compassed; only that was in itself a symptom. That a visit from Milly should, in this projection of necessities, strike him as of the last incongruity, quite as a hateful idea, and above all as spoiling, should one put it grossly, his game—the adoption of such a view might of course have an identity with one of those numerous ways of being a fool that seemed so to abound for him. It would remain none the less the way to which he should be in advance most reconciled. His mature motive, as to which he allowed himself no grain of illusion, had thus in an hour taken imaginative possession of the place: that precisely was how he saw it seated there, already unpacked and settled, for Milly's innocence, for Milly's beauty, no matter how short a time, to be housed with. There were things she would never recognize, never feel, never catch in the air; but this made no difference in the fact that her brushing against them would do nobody any good. The discrimination and the scruple were for *him.* So he felt all the parts of the case together, while Kate showed admirably as feeling none of them. Of course, however—when hadn't it to be his last word?—Kate was always sublime.

That came up in all connexions during the rest of these first days; came up in especial under pressure of the fact that each time our plighted pair snatched, in its passage, at the good fortune of half an hour together, they were doomed—though Densher felt it as all by his act—to spend a part of the rare occasion in wonder at their luck and in study of its queer character. This was the case after he might be supposed to have got, in a manner, used to it; it was the case after the girl—ready always, as we say, with the last word—had given him the benefit of her righting of every wrong appearance, a support familiar to him now in reference to other phases. It was still the case after he possibly might, with a little imagination, as she freely insisted, have made out, by the visible working of the crisis, what idea on Mrs. Lowder's part had determined it. Such as the idea was—and that it suited Kate's own book she openly professed—he had only to see how things were turning out to feel it strikingly justified. Densher's reply to all this vividness was that of course Aunt Maud's intervention hadn't been occult, even for *his* vividness, from the moment she had written him, with characteristic concentration, that if he should see his way to come to Venice for a fortnight she should engage he would find it no blunder. It took Aunt Maud really to do such things in such ways; just as it took him, he

was ready to confess, to do such others as he must now strike them all—didn't he?—as committed to Mrs. Lowder's admonition had been of course a direct reference to what she had said to him at Lancaster Gate before his departure the night Milly had failed them through illness; only it had at least matched that remarkable outbreak in respect to the quantity of good nature it attributed to him. The young man's discussions of his situation—which were confined to Kate; he had none with Aunt Maud herself—suffered a little, it may be divined, by the sense that he couldn't put everything off, as he privately expressed it, on other people. His ears in solitude, were apt to burn with the reflexion that Mrs. Lowder had simply tested him, seen him as he was and made out what could be done with him. She had had but to whistle for him and he had come. If she had taken for granted his good nature she was as justified as Kate declared. This awkwardness of his conscience, both in respect to his general plasticity, the fruit of his feeling plasticity, within limits, to be a mode of life like another—certainly better than some, and particularly in respect to such confusion as might reign about what he had really come for—this inward ache was not wholly dispelled by the style, charming as that was, of Kate's poetic versions. Even the high wonder and delight of Kate couldn't set him right with himself when there was something quite distinct from these things that kept him wrong.

In default of being right with himself he had meanwhile, for one thing, the interest of seeing—and quite for the first time in his life—whether, on a given occasion, that might be quite so necessary to happiness as was commonly assumed and as he had up to this moment never doubted. He was engaged distinctly in an adventure—he who had never thought himself cut out for them, and it fairly helped him that he was able at moments to say to himself that he mustn't fall below it. At his hotel, alone, by night, or in the course of the few late strolls he was finding time to take through dusky labyrinthine alleys and empty *campi,*[ax] overhung with mouldering palaces,[21] where he paused in disgust at his want of ease and where the sound of a rare footstep on the enclosed pavement was like that of a retarded dancer in a banquet-hall deserted—during these interludes he entertained cold views, even to the point, at moments, on the principle that the shortest follies are the best, of thinking of immediate departure as not only possible but as indicated. He had however only to cross again the threshold of Palazzo Leporelli to see all the elements of the business compose, as painters called it, differently. It began to strike him then that departure wouldn't curtail, but would signally coarsen his folly, and that above all, as he hadn't really "begun" anything, had only submitted, consented, but too generously indulged and condoned the beginnings of others, he had no call to treat himself with superstitious rigor. The single thing that was clear in complications was that, whatever happened, one was to behave as a gentleman—to which was added indeed the perhaps slightly less shining truth that complications might sometimes have their tedium beguiled by a study of the question of how a gentleman would behave.[22] This question, I hasten to add, was not in the last resort Densher's greatest worry. Three women were looking to him at once, and, though such a predicament could never be, from the point of view of facility, quite the ideal, it yet had, thank goodness, its immediate workable law. The law was not to be a brute—in return for amiabilities. He hadn't come all the way out from England to be a brute. He hadn't thought of what it might give him to have a fortnight, however handicapped, with Kate in Venice, to be a brute. He hadn't treated Mrs. Lowder as if in responding to her suggestion he had understood her—he hadn't done that either to be a brute. And what he had prepared least of all for such an anticlimax was the prompt and inevitable, the achieved surrender—ds a gentleman, oh that indubitably! -to the unexpected impression made by poor pale exquisite Milly as the mistress of a grand old palace and the dispenser of an hospitality more irresistible, thanks to all the conditions, than any ever known to him.

This spectacle had for him an eloquence, an authority, a felicity—he scarce knew by what strange name to call it—for which he said to himself that he had not consciously bargained. Her welcome, her frankness, sweetness, sadness, brightness, her disconcerting poetry, as he made shift at moments to call it, helped as it was by the beauty of her whole setting and by the perception at the same time, on the observer's part, that this element gained from her, in a manner, for effect and harmony, as much as it gave—her whole attitude had, to his imagination, meanings that hung about it, waiting upon her, hovering, dropping and quavering forth again, like vague faint snatches, mere ghosts of sound, of old-fashioned melancholy music. It was positively well for him, he had his times of reflecting, that he couldn't put it off on Kate and Mrs. Lowder, as a gentleman so conspicuously wouldn't, that—well, that he had been rather taken in by not having known in advance! There had been now five days of it all without his risking even to Kate alone any hint of what he ought to have known and of what in particular therefore had taken him in. The truth was doubtless that really, when it came to any free handling and naming of things, they were living together, the five of them, in an air in which an ugly effect of "blurting out" might easily be produced. He came back with his friend on each occasion to the blest miracle of renewed propinquity, which had a double virtue in that favoring air. He breathed on it as if he could scarcely believe it, yet the time had passed, in spite of this privilege, without his quite committing himself, for her ear, to any such comment on Milly's high style and state as would have corresponded with the amount of recognition it had produced in him. Behind everything for him was his renewed remembrance, which had fairly become a habit, that he had been the first to know her. This was what they had all insisted on, in her absence, that day at Mrs. Lowder's; and this was in especial what had made him feel its influence on his immediately paying her a second visit. Its influence had been all there, been

in the high-hung, rumbling carriage with them, from the moment she took him to drive, covering them in together as if it had been a rug of softest silk. It had worked as a clear connexion with something lodged in the past, something already their own. He had more than once recalled how he had said to himself even at that moment, at some point in the drive, that he was not there, not just as he was in so doing it, through Kate and Kate's idea, but through Milly and Milly's own, and through himself and his own, unmistakably—as well as through the little facts, whatever they had amounted to, of his time in New York.

—II—

There was at last, with everything that made for it, an occasion when he got from Kate, on what she now spoke of as his eternal refrain, an answer of which he was to measure afterwards the precipitating effect. His eternal refrain was the way he came back to the riddle of Mrs. Lowder's view of her profit—a view so hard to reconcile with the chances she gave them to meet. Impatiently, at this, the girl denied the chances, wanting to know from him, with a fine irony that smote him rather straight, whether he felt their opportunities as anything so grand. He looked at her deep in the eyes when she had sounded this note; it was the least he could let her off with for having made him visibly flush. For some reason then, with it, the sharpness dropped out of her tone, which became sweet and sincere. " 'Meet,' my dear man," she expressively echoed; "does it strike you that we get, after all, so very much out of our meetings?"

"On the contrary—they're starvation diet. All I mean is—and it's all I've meant from the day I came—that we at least get more than Aunt Maud."

"Ah but you see," Kate replied, "you don't understand what Aunt Maud gets."

"Exactly so—and it's what I don't understand that keeps me so fascinated with the question. She gives me no light; she's prodigious. She takes everything as of a natural—!"

"She takes it as 'of a natural' that at this rate I shall be making my reflexions about you. There's every appearance for her," Kate went on, "that what she had made her mind up to as possible is possible; that what she had thought more likely than not to happen is happening. The very essence of her, as you surely by this time have made out for yourself, is that when she adopts a view she—well, to her own sense, really brings the thing about, fairly terrorizes with her view any other, any opposite view, and those, not less, who represent that. I've often thought success comes to her"—Kate continued to study the phenomenon—"by the spirit in her that dares and defies her idea not to prove the right one. One has seen it so again and again, in the face of everything, become the right one."

Densher had for this, as he listened, a smile of the largest response. "Ah my dear child, if you can explain I of course needn't not 'understand.' I'm condemned to that," he on his side presently explained, "only when understanding fails." He took a moment; then he pursued: "Does she think she terrorizes *us?"* To which he added while, without immediate speech, Kate but looked over the place: "Does she believe anything so stiff as that you've really changed about me?" He knew now that he was probing the girl deep—something told him so; but that was a reason the more. "Has she got it into her head that you dislike me?"

To this, of a sudden, Kate's answer was strong. "You could yourself easily put it there!"

He wondered. "By telling her so?"

"No," said Kate as with amusement at his simplicity; "I don't ask that of you."

"Oh my dear," Densher laughed, "when you ask, you know, so little—!"

There was a full irony in this, on his own part, that he saw her resist the impulse to take up. "I'm perfectly justified in what I've asked," she quietly returned. "It's doing beautifully for you." Their eyes again intimately met, and the effect was to make her proceed. "You're not a bit unhappy."

"Oh ain't I?" he brought out very roundly.

"It doesn't practically show—which is enough for Aunt Maud. You're wonderful, you're beautiful," Kate said; "and if you really want to know whether I believe you're doing it you may take from me perfectly that I see it coming." With which, by a quick transition, as if she had settled the case, she asked him the hour.

"Oh only twelve-ten"—he had looked at his watch. "We've taken but thirteen minutes; we've time yet."

"Then we must walk. We must go toward them."

Densher, from where they had been standing, measured the long reach of the Square. "They're still in their

shop. They're safe for half an hour."

"That shows then, that shows!" said Kate.

This colloquy had taken place in the middle of Piazza San Marco, always, as a great social saloon, a smooth-floored, blue-roofed chamber of amenity, favorable to talk; or rather, to be exact, not in the middle, but at the point where our pair had paused by a common impulse after leaving the great mosque-like church. It rose now, domed and pinnacled, but a little way behind them, and they had in front the vast empty space, enclosed by its arcades, to which at that hour movement and traffic were mostly confined. Venice was at breakfast, the Venice of the visitor and the possible acquaintance, and, except for the parties of importunate pigeons picking up the crumbs of perpetual feasts, their prospect was clear and they could see their companions hadn't yet been, and weren't for a while longer likely to be, disgorged by the lace-shop, in one of the *loggie,*[ay] where, shortly before, they had left them for a look-in—the expression was artfully Densher's—at Saint Mark's. Their morning had happened to take such a turn as brought this chance to the surface; yet his allusion, just made to Kate, hadn't been an overstatement of their general opportunity. The worst that could be said of their general opportunity was that it was essentially in presence—in presence of every one; every one consisting at this juncture, in a peopled world, of Susan Shepherd, Aunt Maud and Milly. But the proof how, even in presence, the opportunity could become special was furnished precisely by this view of the compatibility of their comfort with a certain amount of lingering. The others had assented to their not waiting in the shop; it was of course the least the others could do. What had really helped them this morning was the fact that, on his turning up, as he always called it, at the palace, Milly had not, as before, been able to present herself. Custom and use had hitherto seemed fairly established; on his coming round, day after day—eight days had been now so conveniently marked—their friends, Milly's and his, conveniently dispersed and left him to sit with her till luncheon. Such was the perfect operation of the scheme on which he had been, as he phrased it to himself, had out; so that certainly there was that amount of justification for Kate's vision of success. He *had,* for Mrs. Lowder—he couldn't help it while sitting there—the air, which was the thing to be desired, of no absorption in Kate sufficiently deep to be alarming. He had failed their young hostess each morning as little as she had failed him; it was only to-day that she hadn't been well enough to see him.

That had made a mark, all round; the mark was in the way in which, gathered in the room of state, with the place, from the right time, all bright and cool and beflowered, as always, to re- ceive her descent, they—the rest of them—simply looked at each other. It was lurid—lurid, in all probability, for each of them privately—that they had uttered no common regrets. It was strange for our young man above all that, if the poor girl was indisposed to that degree, the hush of gravity, of apprehension, of significance of some sort, should be the most the case—that of the guests—could permit itself. The hush, for that matter, continued after the party of four had gone down to the gondola and taken their places in it. Milly had sent them word that she hoped they would go out and enjoy themselves, and this indeed had produced a second remarkable look, a look as of their knowing, one quite as well as the other, what such a message meant as provision for the alternative beguilement of Densher. She wished not to have spoiled his morning, and he had therefore, in civility, to take it as pleasantly patched up. Mrs. Stringham had helped the affair out, Mrs. Stringham who, when it came to that, knew their friend better than any of them. She knew her so well that she knew herself as acting in exquisite compliance with conditions comparatively obscure, approximately awful to them, by not thinking it necessary to stay at home. She had corrected that element of the perfunctory which was the slight fault, for all of them, of the occasion; she had invented a preference for Mrs. Lowder and herself; she had remembered the fond dreams of the visitation of lace that had hitherto always been brushed away by accidents, and it had come up as well for her that Kate had, the day before, spoken of the part played by fatality in her own failure of real acquaintance with the inside of Saint Mark's. Densher's sense of Susan Shepherd's conscious intervention had by this time a corner of his mind all to itself; something that had begun for them at Lancaster Gate was now a sentiment clothed in a shape; her action, ineffably discreet, had at all events a way of affecting him as for the most part subtly, even when not superficially, in his own interest. They were not, as a pair, as a "team," really united; there were too many persons, at least three, and too many things, between them; but meanwhile something was preparing that would draw them closer. He scarce knew what: probably nothing but his finding, at some hour when it would be a service to do so, that she had all the while understood him. He even had a presentiment of a juncture at which the understanding of every one else would fail and this deep little person's alone survive.

Such was to-day, in its freshness, the moral air, as we may say, that hung about our young friends; these had been the small accidents and quiet forces to which they owed the advantage we have seen them in some sort enjoying. It seemed in fact fairly to deepen for them as they stayed their course again; the splendid Square, which had so notoriously, in all the years, witnessed more of the joy of life than any equal area in Europe, furnished them, in their remoteness from earshot, with solitude and security. It was as if, being in possession, they could say what they liked; and it was also as if, in consequence of that, each had an apprehension of what the other wanted to say. It was most of all for them, moreover, as if this very quantity, seated on their lips in the bright historic air, where the only sign for their ears was the flutter of the doves,

begot in the heart of each a fear. There might have been a betrayal of that in the way Densher broke the silence resting on her last words. “What did you mean just now that I can do to make Mrs. Lowder believe? For myself, stupidly, if you will, I don’t see, from the moment I can’t lie to her, what else there is but lying.”

Well, she could tell him. “You can say something both handsome and sincere to her about Milly—whom you honestly like so much. That wouldn’t be lying; and, coming from you, it would have an effect. You don‘t, you know, say much about her.” And Kate put before him the fruit of observation. “You don’t, you know, speak of her at all.”

“And has Aunt Maud,” Densher asked, “told you so?” Then as the girl, for answer, only seemed to bethink herself, “You must have extraordinary conversations!” he exclaimed.

Yes, she had bethought herself. “We have extraordinary conversations.”

His look, while their eyes met, marked him as disposed to hear more about them; but there was something in her own, apparently, that defeated the opportunity. He questioned her in a moment on a different matter, which had been in his mind a week, yet in respect to which he had had no chance so good as this. “Do you happen to know then, as such wonderful things pass between you, what she makes of the incident, the other day, of Lord Mark’s so very superficial visit?—his having spent here, as I gather, but the two or three hours necessary for seeing our friend and yet taken no time at all, since he went off by the same night’s train, for seeing any one else. What can she make of his not having waited to see you, or to see herself—with all he owes her?”

“Oh of course,” said Kate, “she understands. He came to make Milly his offer of marriage—he came for nothing but that. As Milly wholly declined it his business was for the time at an end. He couldn’t quite on the spot turn round to make up to us.”

Kate had looked surprised that, as a matter of taste on such an adventurer’s part, Densher shouldn’t see it. But Densher was lost in another thought. “Do you mean that when, turning up myself, I found him leaving her, that was what had been taking place between them?”

“Didn’t you make it out, my dear?” Kate inquired.

“What sort of a blundering weathercock then is he?” the young man went on in his wonder.

“Oh don’t make too little of him!” Kate smiled. “Do you pretend that Milly didn’t tell you?”

“How great an ass he had made of himself?”

Kate continued to smile. “You *are* in love with her, you know.”

He gave her another long look. “Why, since she has refused him, should my opinion of Lord Mark show it? I’m not obliged, however, to think well of him for such treatment of the other persons I’ve mentioned, and I feel I don’t understand from you why Mrs. Lowder should.”

“She doesn’t—but she doesn’t care,” Kate explained. “You know perfectly the terms on which lots of London people live together even when they’re supposed to live very well. He’s not committed to us—he was having his try. Mayn’t an unsatisfied man,” she asked, “always have his try?”

“And come back afterwards, with confidence in a welcome, to the victim of his inconstancy?”

Kate consented, as for argument, to be thought of as a victim. “Oh but he has had his try at *me.* So it’s all right.”

“Through your also having, you mean, refused him?”

She balanced an instant during which Densher might have just wondered if pure historic truth were to suffer a slight strain. But she dropped on the right side. “I haven’t let it come to that. I’ve been too discouraging. Aunt Maud,” she went on—now as lucid as ever—“considers, no doubt, that she has a pledge from him in respect to me; a pledge that would have been broken if Milly had accepted him. As the case stands that makes no difference.”

Densher laughed out. “It isn’t *his* merit that he has failed.”

“It’s still his merit, my dear, that he’s Lord Mark. He’s just what he was, and what he knew he was. It’s not for me either to reflect on him after I’ve so treated him.”

“Oh,” said Densher impatiently, “you’ve treated him beautifully.”

“I’m glad,” she smiled, “that you can still be jealous.” But before he could take it up she had more to say. “I don’t see why it need puzzle you that Milly’s so marked line gratifies Aunt Maud more than anything else can displease her. What does she see but that Milly herself recognizes her situation with you as too precious to be

spoiled? Such a recognition as that can't but seem to her to involve in some degree your own recognition. Out of which she therefore gets it that the more you have for Milly the less you have for me."

There were moments again—we know that from the first they had been numerous—when he felt with a strange mixed passion the mastery of her mere way of putting things. There was something in it that bent him at once to conviction and to reaction. And this effect, however it be named, now broke into his tone. "Oh if she began to know what I have for you—!"

It wasn't ambiguous, but Kate stood up to it. "Luckily for us we may really consider she doesn't. So successful have we been."

"Well," he presently said, "I take from you what you give me, and I suppose that, to be consistent—to stand on my feet where I do stand at all—I ought to thank you. Only, you know, what you give me seems to me, more than anything else, the larger and larger size of my job. It seems to me more than anything else what you expect of me. It never seems to me somehow what I may expect of you. There's so much you *don't* give me."

She appeared to wonder. "And pray what is it I don't—?"

"I give you proof," said Densher. "You give me none."

"What then do you call proof?" she after a moment ventured to ask.

"You doing something for me."

She considered with surprise. "Am I not doing *this* for you? Do you call this nothing?"

"Nothing at all."

"Ah I risk, my dear, everything for it."

They had strolled slowly further, but he was brought up short. "I thought you exactly contend that, with your aunt so bamboozled, you risk nothing!"

It was the first time since the launching of her wonderful idea that he had seen her at a loss. He judged the next instant moreover that she didn't like it—either the being so or the being seen, for she soon spoke with an impatience that showed her as wounded; an appearance that produced in himself, he no less quickly felt, a sharp pang of indulgence. "What then do you wish me to risk?"

The appeal from danger touched him, but all to make him, as he would have said, worse. "What I wish is to be loved. How can I feel at this rate that I *am?"* Oh she understood him, for all she might so bravely disguise it, and that made him feel straighter than if she hadn't. Deep, always, was his sense of life with her—deep as it had been from the moment of those signs of life that in the dusky London of two winters ago they had originally exchanged. He had never taken her for unguarded, ignorant, weak; and if he put to her a claim for some intenser faith between them this was because he believed it could reach her and she could meet it. "I can go on perhaps," he said, "with help. But I can't go on without."

She looked away from him now, and it showed him how she understood. "We ought to be there—I mean when they come out."

"They won't come out—not yet. And I don't care if they do." To which he straightway added, as if to deal with the charge of selfishness that his words, sounding for himself, struck him as enabling her to make: "Why not have done with it all and face the music as we are?" It broke from him in perfect sincerity. "Good God, if you'd only *take* me!"

It brought her eyes round to him again, and he could see how, after all, somewhere deep within, she felt his rebellion more sweet than bitter. Its effect on her spirit and her sense was visibly to hold her an instant. "We've gone too far," she none the less pulled herself together to reply. "Do you want to kill her?"

He had an hesitation that wasn't all candid. "Kill, you mean, Aunt Maud?"

"You know whom I mean. We've told too many lies."

Oh at this his head went up. "I, my dear, have told none!"

He had brought it out with a sharpness that did him good, but he had naturally, none the less, to take the look it made her give him. "Thank you very much."

Her expression, however, failed to check the words that had already risen to his lips. "Rather than lay myself open to the least appearance of it I'll go this very night."

"Then go," said Kate Croy.

He knew after a little, while they walked on again together, that what was in the air for him, and disconcertingly, was not the violence, but much rather the cold quietness, of the way this had come from her. They walked on together, and it was for a minute as if their difference had become of a sudden, in all truth, a split-as if the basis of his departure had been settled. Then, incoherently and still more suddenly, recklessly moreover, since they now might easily, from under the arcades, be observed, he passed his hand into her arm with a force that produced for them another pause. “I’ll tell any lie you want, any your idea requires, if you’ll only come to me.”

“Come to you?”

“Come to me.”

“How? Where?”

She spoke low, but there was somehow, for his uncertainty, a wonder in her being so equal to him. “To my rooms, which are perfectly possible, and in taking which, the other day, I had you, as you must have felt, in view. We can arrange it—with two grains of courage. People in our case always arrange it.” She listened as for the good information, and there was support for him—since it was a question of his going step by step—in the way she took no refuge in showing herself shocked. He had in truth not expected of her that particular vulgarity, but the absence of it only added the thrill of a deeper reason to his sense of possibilities. For the knowledge of what she was he had absolutely to see her now, incapable of refuge, stand there for him in all the light of the day and of his admirable merciless meaning. Her mere listening in fact made him even understand himself as he hadn’t yet done. Idea for idea, his own was thus already, and in the germ, beautiful. “There’s nothing for me possible but to feel that I’m not a fool. It’s all I have to say, but you must know what it means. With you I can do it—I’ll go as far as you demand or as you will yourself. Without you—I’ll be hanged! And I must be sure.”

She listened so well that she was really listening after he had ceased to speak. He had kept his grasp of her, drawing her close, and though they had again, for the time, stopped walking, his talk—for others at a distance—might have been, in the matchless place, that of any impressed tourist to any slightly more detached companion. On possessing himself of her arm he had made her turn, so that they faced afresh to Saint Mark’s, over the great presence of which his eyes moved while she twiddled her parasol. She now, however, made a motion that confronted them finally with the opposite end. Then only she spoke—“Please take your hand out of my arm.” He understood at once: she had made out in the shade of the gallery the issue of the others from their place of purchase. So they went to them side by side, and it was all right. The others had seen them as well and waited for them, complacent enough, under one of the arches. They themselves too—he argued that Kate would argue—looked perfectly ready, decently patient, properly accommodating. They themselves suggested nothing worse—always by Kate’s system—than a pair of the children of a supercivilized age making the best of an awkwardness. They didn’t nevertheless hurry—that would overdo it; so he had time to feel, as it were, what he felt. He felt, ever so distinctly—it was with this he faced Mrs. Lowder—that he was already in a sense possessed of what he wanted. There was more to come—everything; he had by no means, with his companion, had it all out. Yet what he was possessed of was real—the fact that she hadn’t thrown over his lucidity the horrid shadow of cheap reprobation. Of this he had had so sore a fear that its being dispelled was in itself of the nature of bliss. The danger had dropped—it was behind him there in the great sunny space. So far she was good for what he wanted.

—III—

She was good enough, as it proved, for him to put to her that evening, and with further ground for it, the next sharpest question that had been on his lips in the morning—which his other preoccupation had then, to his consciousness, crowded out. His opportunity was again made, as befell, by his learning from Mrs. Stringham, on arriving, as usual, with the close of day, at the palace, that Milly must fail them again at dinner, but would to all appearance be able to come down later. He had found Susan Shepherd alone in the great saloon, where even more candles than their friend’s large common allowance—she grew daily more splendid; they were all struck with it and chaffed her about it-lighted up the pervasive mystery of Style. He had thus five minutes with the good lady before Mrs. Lowder and Kate appeared—minutes illumined indeed to a longer reach than by the number of Milly’s candles.

“*May* she come down—ought she if she isn’t really up to it?” He had asked that in the wonderment always stirred in him by glimpses—rare as were these—of the inner truth about the girl. There was of course a question of health—it was in the air, it was in the ground he trod, in the food he tasted, in the sounds he heard, it was everywhere. But it was everywhere with the effect of a request to him—to his very delicacy, to

the common discretion of others as well as his own—that no allusion to it should be made. There had practically been none, that morning, on her explained non-appearance-the absence of it, as we know, quite monstrous and awkward; and this passage with Mrs. Stringham offered him his first license to open his eyes. He had gladly enough held them closed; all the more that his doing so performed for his own spirit a useful function. If he positively wanted not to be brought up with his nose against Milly's facts, what better proof could he have that his conduct was marked by straightness? It was perhaps pathetic for her, and for himself was perhaps even ridiculous; but he hadn't even the amount of curiosity that he would have had about an ordinary friend. He might have shaken himself at moments to try, for a sort of dry decency, to have it; but that too, it appeared, wouldn't come. In what therefore was the duplicity? He was at least sure about his feelings—it being so established that he had none at all. They were all for Kate, without a feather's weight to spare. He was acting for Kate—not, by the deviation of an inch, for her friend. He was accordingly not interested, for had he been interested he would have cared, and had he cared he would have wanted to know. Had he wanted to know he wouldn't have been purely passive, and it was his pure passivity that had to represent his dignity and his honour. His dignity and his honour, at the same time, let us add, fortunately fell short to-night of spoiling his little talk with Susan Shepherd. One glimpse—it was as if she had wished to give him that; and it was as if, for himself, on current terms, he could oblige her by accepting it. She not only permitted, she fairly invited him to open his eyes. "I'm so glad you're here." It was no answer to his question, but it had for the moment to serve. And the rest was fully to come.

He smiled at her and presently found himself, as a kind of consequence of communion with her, talking her own language. "It's a very wonderful experience."

"Well"—and her raised face shone up at him—"that's all I want you to feel about it. If I weren't afraid," she added, "there are things I should like to say to you."

"And what are you afraid of, please?" he encouragingly asked.

"Of other things that I may possibly spoil. Besides, I don't, you know, seem to have the chance. You're always, you know, *with* her."

He was strangely supported, it struck him, in his fixed smile; which was the more fixed as he felt in these last words an exact description of his course. It was an odd thing to have come to, but he was always with her. "Ah," he none the less smiled, "I'm not with her now."

"No—and I'm so glad, since I get this from it. She's ever so much better."

"Better? Then she *has* been worse?"

Mrs. Stringham waited. "She has been marvelous—that's what she has been. She is marvelous. But she's really better."

"Oh then if she's really better—!" But he checked himself, wanting only to be easy about it and above all not to appear engaged to the point of mystification. "We shall miss her the more at dinner."

Susan Shepherd, however, was all there for him. "She's keeping herself. You'll see. You'll not really need to miss anything. There's to be a little party."

"Ah I do see—by this aggravated grandeur."

"Well, it is lovely, isn't it? I want the whole thing. She's lodged for the first time as she ought, from her type, to be; and doing it—I mean bringing out all the glory of the place—makes her really happy. It's a Veronese picture,[23] as near as can be—with me as the inevitable dwarf, the small blackamoor, put into a corner of the foreground for effect. If I only had a hawk or a hound or something of that sort I should do the scene more honour. The old house-keeper, the woman in charge here, has a big red cockatoo that I might borrow and perch on my thumb for the evening." These explanations and sundry others Mrs. Stringham gave, though not all with the result of making him feel that the picture closed him in. What part was there for *him,* with his attitude that lacked the highest style, in a composition in which everything else would have it? "They won't, however, be at dinner, the few people she expects—they come round afterwards from their respective hotels; and Sir Luke Strett and his niece, the principal ones, will have arrived from London but an hour or two ago. It's for him she has wanted to do something—to let it begin at once. We shall see more of him, because she likes him; and I'm so glad—she'll be glad too—that you're to see him." The good lady, in connexion with it, was urgent, was almost unnaturally bright. "So I greatly hope—!" But her hope fairly lost itself in the wide light of her cheer.

He considered a little this appearance, while she let him, he thought, into still more knowledge than she uttered. "What is it you hope?"

"Well, that you'll stay on."

“Do you mean after dinner?” She meant, he seemed to feel, so much that he could scarce tell where it ended or began.

“Oh that, of course. Why we’re to have music—beautiful instruments and songs; and not Tasso declaimed as in the guide-books either. She has arranged it—or at least I have. That is Eugenio has. Besides, you’re in the picture.”

“Oh—I!” said Densher almost with the gravity of a real protest.

“You’ll be the grand young man who surpasses the others and holds up his head and the wine-cup. What we hope,” Mrs. Stringham pursued, “is that you’ll be faithful to us—that you’ve not come for a mere foolish few days.”

Densher’s more private and particular shabby realities turned, without comfort, he was conscious, at this touch, in the artificial repose he had in his anxiety about them but half-managed to induce. The way smooth ladies, travelling for their pleasure and housed in Veronese pictures, talked to plain embarrassed working-men, engaged in an unprecedented sacrifice of time and of the opportunity for modest acquisition! The things they took for granted and the general misery of explaining! He couldn’t tell them how he had tried to work, how it was partly what he had moved into rooms for, only to find himself, almost for the first time in his life, stricken and sterile; because that would give them a false view of the source of his restlessness, if not of the degree of it. It would operate, indirectly perhaps, but infallibly, to add to that weight as of expected performance which these very moments with Mrs. Stringham caused more and more to settle on his heart. He had incurred it, the expectation of performance; the thing was done, and there was no use talking; again, again the cold breath of it was in the air. So there he was. And at best he floundered. “I’m afraid you won’t understand when I say I’ve very tiresome things to consider. Botherations, necessities at home. The pinch, the pressure in London.”

But she understood in perfection; she rose to the pinch and the pressure and showed how they had been her own very element. “Oh the daily talk and the daily wage, the golden guerdon or reward ? No one knows better than I how they haunt one in the flight of the precious deceiving days. Aren’t they just what I myself have given up? I’ve given up all to follow *her*. I wish you could feel as I do. And can’t you,” she asked, “write about Venice?”

He very nearly wished, for the minute, that he could feel as she did; and he smiled for her kindly. “Do you write about Venice?”

“No; but I would—oh wouldn’t I?—if I hadn’t so completely given up. She’s, you know, my princess, and to one’s princess—”

“One makes the whole sacrifice?”

“Precisely. There you are!”

It pressed on him with this that never had a man been in so many places at once. “I quite understand that she’s yours. Only you see she’s not mine.” He felt he could somehow, for honesty, risk that, as he had the moral certainty she wouldn’t repeat it and least of all to Mrs. Lowder, who would find in it a disturbing implication. This was part of what he liked in the good lady, that she didn’t repeat, and also that she gave him a delicate sense of her shyly wishing him to know it. That was in itself a hint of possibilities between them, of a relation, beneficent and elastic for him, which wouldn’t engage him further than he could see. Yet even as he afresh made this out he felt how strange it all was. She wanted, Susan Shepherd then, as appeared, the same thing Kate wanted, only wanted it, as still further appeared, in so different a way and from a motive so different, even though scarce less deep. Then Mrs. Lowder wanted, by so odd an evolution of her exuberance, exactly what each of the others did; and he was between them all, he was in the midst. Such perceptions made occasions—well, occasions for fairly wondering if it mightn’t be best just to consent, luxuriously, to be the ass the whole thing involved. Trying not to be and yet keeping in it was of the two things the more asinine. He was glad there was no male witness; it was a circle of petticoats; he shouldn’t have liked a man to see him.[24] He only had for a moment a sharp thought of Sir Luke Strett, the great master of the knife whom Kate in London had spoken of Milly as in commerce with, and whose renewed intervention at such a distance, just announced to him, required some accounting for. He had a vision of great London surgeons—if this one was a surgeon—as incisive all round; so that he should perhaps after all not wholly escape the ironic attention of his own sex. The most he might be able to do was not to care; while he was trying not to he could take that in. It was a train, however, that brought up the vision of Lord Mark as well. Lord Mark had caught him twice in the fact—the fact of his absurd posture; and that made a second male. But it was comparatively easy not to mind Lord Mark.

His companion had before this taken him up, and in a tone to confirm her discretion, on the matter of Milly’s not being his princess. “Of course she’s not. You must do something first.”

Densher gave it his thought. “Wouldn’t it be rather she who must?”

It had more than he intended the effect of bringing her to a stand. “I see. No doubt, if one takes it so.” Her cheer was for the time in eclipse, and she looked over the place, avoiding his eyes, as in the wonder of what Milly could do. “And yet she has wanted to be kind.”

It made him on the spot feel a brute. “Of course she has. No one could be more charming. She has treated me as if *I* were somebody. Call her my hostess as I’ve never had nor imagined a hostess, and I’m with you altogether. Of course,” he added in the right spirit for her, “I do see that it’s quite court life.”

She promptly showed how this was almost all she wanted of him. “That’s all I mean, if you understand it of such a court as never was: one of the courts of heaven, the court of a reigning seraph, a sort of a vice-queen of an angel. That will do perfectly.”

“Oh well then I grant it. Only court life as a general thing, you know,” he observed, “isn’t supposed to pay.”

“Yes, one has read; but this is beyond any book. That’s just the beauty here; it’s why she’s the great and only princess. With her, at her court,” said Mrs. Stringham, “it does pay.” Then as if she had quite settled it for him: “You’ll see for yourself.”

He waited a moment, but said nothing to discourage her. “I think you were right just now. One must do something first.”

“Well, you’ve done something.”

“No—I don’t see that. I can do more.”

Oh well, she seemed to say, if he would have it so! “You can do everything, you know.”

“Everything” was rather too much for him to take up gravely, and he modestly let it alone, speaking the next moment, to avert fatuity, of a different but a related matter. “Why has she sent for Sir Luke Strett if, as you tell me, she’s so much better?”

“She hasn’t sent. He has come of himself,” Mrs. Stringham explained. “He has wanted to come.”

“Isn’t that rather worse then—if it means he mayn’t be easy?”

“He was coming, from the first, for his holiday. She has known that these several weeks.” After which Mrs. Stringham added: “You can make him easy.”

“I can?” he candidly wondered. It was truly the circle of petticoats. “What have I to do with it for a man like that?”

“How do you know,” said his friend, “what he’s like? He’s not like any one you’ve ever seen. He’s a great beneficent being.”

“Ah then he can do without me. I’ve no call, as an outsider, to meddle.”

“Tell him, all the same,” Mrs. Stringham urged, “what you think.”

“What I think of Miss Theale?” Densher stared. It was, as they said, a large order. But he found the right note. “It’s none of his business.”

It did seem a moment for Mrs. Stringham too the right note. She fixed him at least with an expression still bright, but searching, that showed almost to excess what she saw in it; though what this might be he was not to make out till afterwards. “Say *that* to him then. Anything will do for him as a means of getting at you.”

“And why should he get at me?”

“Give him a chance to. Let him talk to you. Then you’ll see.”

All of which, on Mrs. Stringham’s part, sharpened his sense of immersion in an element rather more strangely than agreeably warm—a sense that was moreover, during the next two or three hours, to be fed to satiety by several other impressions. Milly came down after dinner, half a dozen friends—objects of interest mainly, it appeared, to the ladies of Lancaster Gate—having by that time arrived; and with this call on her attention, the further call of her musicians ushered by Eugenio, but personally and separately welcomed, and the supreme opportunity offered in the arrival of the great doctor, who came last of all, he felt her diffuse in wide warm waves the spell of a general, a beatific mildness. There was a deeper depth of it, doubtless, for some than for others; what he in particular knew of it was that he seemed to stand in it up to his neck. He moved about in it and it made no splash; he floated, he noiselessly swam in it, and they were all together, for that matter, like fishes in a crystal pool. The effect of the place, the beauty of the scene, had probably much to

do with it; the golden grace of the high rooms, chambers of art in themselves, took care, as an influence, of the general manner, and made people bland without making them solemn. They were only people, as Mrs. Stringham had said, staying for the week or two at the inns, people who during the day had fingered their Baedekers, gaped at their frescoes and differed, over fractions of francs, with their gondoliers. But Milly, let loose among them in a wonderful white dress, brought them somehow into relation with something that made them more finely genial; so that if the Veronese picture of which he had talked with Mrs. Stringham was not quite constituted, the comparative prose of the previous hours, the traces of insensibility qualified by "beating down," were at last almost nobly disowned. There was perhaps something for him in the accident of his seeing her for the first time in white, but she hadn't yet had occasion—circulating with a clearness intensified—to strike him as so happily pervasive. She was different, younger, fairer, with the colour of her braided hair more than ever a not altogether lucky challenge to attention; yet he was loth wholly to explain it by her having quitted this once, for some obscure yet doubtless charming reason, her almost monastic, her hitherto inveterate black. Much as the change did for the value of her presence, she had never yet, when all was said, made it for *him;* and he was not to fail of the further amusement of judging her determined in the matter by Sir Luke Strett's visit. If he could in this connexion have felt jealous of Sir Luke Strett, whose strong face and type, less assimilated by the scene perhaps than any others, he was anon to study from the other side of the saloon, that would doubtless have been most amusing of all. But he couldn't be invidious, even to profit by so high a tide; he felt himself too much "in" it, as he might have said: a moment's reflexion put him more in than anyone. The way Milly neglected him for other cares while Kate and Mrs. Lowder, without so much as the attenuation of a joke, introduced him to English ladies—that was itself a proof; for nothing really of so close a communion had up to this time passed between them as the single bright look and the three gay words (all ostensibly of the last lightness) with which her confessed consciousness brushed by him.

She was acquitting herself to-night as hostess, he could see, under some supreme idea, an inspiration which was half her nerves and half an inevitable harmony; but what he especially recognized was the character that had already several times broken out in her and that she so oddly appeared able, by choice or by instinctive affinity, to keep down or to display. She was the American girl as he had originally found her—found her at moments, it was true, in New York, more than at certain others; she was the American girl as, still more than then, he had seen her on the day of her meeting him in London and in Kate's company. It affected him as a large though queer social resource in her—such as a man, for instance, to his diminution, would never in the world be able to command; and he wouldn't have known whether to see it in an extension or a contraction of "personality," taking it as he did most directly for a confounding extension of surface. Clearly too it was the right thing this evening all round: that came out for him in a word from Kate as she approached him to wreak on him a second introduction. He had under cover of the music melted away from the lady toward whom she had first pushed him; and there was something in her to affect him as telling evasively a tale of their talk in the Piazza. To what did she want to coerce him as a form of penalty for what he had done to her there? It was thus in contact uppermost for him that he had done something; not only caused her perfect intelligence to act in his interest, but left her unable to get away, by any mere private effort, from his inattackable logic. With him thus in presence, and near him—and it had been as unmistakable through dinner—there was no getting away for her at all, there was less of it than ever: so she could only either deal with the question straight, either frankly yield or ineffectually struggle or insincerely argue, or else merely express herself by following up the advantage she did possess. It was part of that advantage for the hour—a brief fallacious makeweight to his pressure—that there were plenty of things left in which he must feel her will. They only told him, these indications, how much she was, in such close quarters, feeling his; and it was enough for him again that her very aspect, as great a variation in its way as Milly's own, gave him back the sense of his action. It had never yet in life been granted him to know, almost materially to taste, as he could do in these minutes, the state of what was vulgarly called conquest. He had lived long enough to have been on occasion "liked," but it had never begun to be allowed him to be liked to any such tune in any such quarter. It was a liking greater than Milly's—or it would be: he felt it in him to answer for that. So at all events he read the case while he noted that Kate was somehow—for Kate-wanting in luster. As a striking young presence she was practically superseded; of the mildness that Milly diffused she had assimilated all her share; she might fairly have been dressed to-night in the little black frock, superficially indistinguishable, that Milly had laid aside. This represented, he perceived, the opposite pole from such an effect as that of her wonderful entrance, under her aunt's eyes—he had never forgotten it—the day of their younger friend's failure at Lancaster Gate. She was, in her accepted effacement—it was actually her acceptance that made the beauty and repaired the damage—under her aunt's eyes now; but whose eyes were not effectually preoccupied? It struck him none the less certainly that almost the first thing she said to him showed an exquisite attempt to appear if not unconvinced at least self-possessed.

"Don't you think her good enough now?"

Almost heedless of the danger of overt freedoms, she eyed Milly from where they stood, noted her in renewed talk, over her further wishes, with the members of her little orchestra, who had approached her with demonstrations of deference enlivened by native humours—things quite in the line of old Venetian comedy.

The girl's idea of music had been happy—a real solvent of shyness, yet not drastic; thanks to the intermissions, discretions, a general habit of mercy to gathered barbarians, that reflected the good manners of its interpreters, representatives though these might be but of the order in which taste was natural and melody rank. It was easy at all events to answer Kate. "Ah my dear, you know how good I think her!"

"But she's *too* nice," Kate returned with appreciation. "Everything suits her so—especially her pearls. They go so with her old lace. I'll trouble you really to look at them." Densher, though aware he had seen them before, had perhaps not "really" looked at them, and had thus not done justice to the embodied poetry—his mind, for Milly's aspects, kept coming back to that—which owed them part of its style. Kate's face, as she considered them, struck him: the long, priceless chain, wound twice round the neck, hung, heavy and pure, down the front of the wearer's breast—so far down that Milly's trick, evidently unconscious, of holding and vaguely fingering and entwining a part of it, conduced presumably to convenience. "She's a dove," Kate went on, "and one somehow doesn't think of doves as bejewelled. Yet they suit her down to the ground."

"Yes—down to the ground is the word." Densher saw now how they suited her, but was perhaps still more aware of something intense in his companion's feeling about them. Milly was indeed a dove; this was the figure, though it most applied to her spirit. Yet he knew in a moment that Kate was just now, for reasons hidden from him, exceptionally under the impression of that element of wealth in her which was a power, which was a great power, and which was dove-like only so far as one remembered that doves have wings and wondrous flights, have them as well as tender tints and soft sounds. It even came to him dimly that such wings could in a given case—*had,* truly, in the case with which he was concerned—spread themselves for protection. Hadn't they, for that matter, lately taken an inordinate reach, and weren't Kate and Mrs. Lowder, weren't Susan Shepherd and he, wasn't *he* in particular, nestling under them to a great increase of immediate ease? All this was a brighter blur in the general light, out of which he heard Kate presently going on.

"Pearls have such a magic that they suit every one."

"They would uncommonly suit you," he frankly returned.

"Oh yes, I see myself!"

As she saw herself, suddenly, he saw her—she would have been splendid; and with it he felt more what she was thinking of. Milly's royal ornament had—under pressure now not wholly occult-taken on the character of a symbol of differences, differences of which the vision was actually in Kate's face. It might have been in her face too that, well as she certainly would look in pearls, pearls were exactly what Merton Densher would never be able to give her. Wasn't that the great difference that Milly tonight symbolized? She unconsciously represented to Kate, and Kate took it in at every pore, that there was nobody with whom she had less in common than a remarkably handsome girl married to a man unable to make her on any such lines as that the least little present. Of these absurdities, however, it was not till afterwards that Densher thought. He could think now, to any purpose, only of what Mrs. Stringham had said to him before dinner. He could but come back to his friend's question of a minute ago. "She's certainly good enough, as you call it, in the sense that I'm assured she's better. Mrs. Stringham, an hour or two since, was in great feather to me about it. She evidently believes her better."

"Well, if they choose to call it so—!"

"And what do *you* call it—as against them?"

"I don't call it anything to anyone but you. I'm not 'against' them!" Kate added as with just a fresh breath of impatience for all he had to be taught.

"That's what I'm talking about," he said. "What do you call it to me?"

It made her wait a little. "She isn't better. She's worse. But that has nothing to do with it."

"Nothing to do?" He wondered.

But she was clear. "Nothing to do with *us.* Except of course that we're doing our best for her. We're making her want to live." And Kate again watched her. "To-night she does want to live." She spoke with a kindness that had the strange property of striking him as inconsequent—so much, and doubtless so unjustly, had all her clearness been an implication of the hard. "It's wonderful. It's beautiful."

"It's beautiful indeed."

He hated somehow the helplessness of his own note; but she had given it no heed. "She's doing it for *him*"—and she nodded in the direction of Milly's medical visitor. "She wants to be for him at her best. But she can't deceive him."

Densher had been looking too; which made him say in a moment : "And do you think *you* can? I mean, if

he's to be with us here, about your sentiments. If Aunt Maud's so thick with him—!"

Aunt Maud now occupied in fact a place at his side and was visibly doing her best to entertain him, though this failed to prevent such a direction of his own eyes—determined, in the way such things happen, precisely by the attention of the others—as Densher became aware of and as Kate promptly marked. "He's looking at you. He wants to speak to you."

"So Mrs. Stringham," the young man laughed, "advised me he would."

"Then let him. Be right with him. I don't need," Kate went on in answer to the previous question, "to deceive him. Aunt Maud, if it's necessary, will do that. I mean that, knowing nothing about me, he can see me only as he sees me. She sees me now so well. He has nothing to do with me."

"Except to reprobate you," Densher suggested.

"For not caring for you? Perfectly. As a brilliant young man driven by it into your relation with Milly—as all *that* I leave you to him."

"Well," said Densher sincerely enough, "I think I can thank you for leaving me to some one easier perhaps with me than yourself."

She had been looking about again meanwhile, the lady having changed her place, for the friend of Mrs. Lowder's to whom she had spoken of introducing him. "All the more reason why I should commit you then to Lady Wells."

"Oh but wait." It was not only that he distinguished Lady Wells from afar, that she inspired him with no eagerness, and that, somewhere at the back of his head, he was fairly aware of the question, in germ, of whether this was the kind of person he should be involved with when they were married. It was furthermore that the consciousness of something he had not got from Kate in the morning, and that logically much concerned him, had been made more keen by these very moments—to say nothing of the consciousness that, with their general smallness of opportunity, he must squeeze each stray instant hard. If Aunt Maud, over there with Sir Luke, noted him as a little "attentive," that might pass for a futile demonstration on the part of a gentleman who had to confess to having, not very gracefully, changed his mind. Besides, just now, he didn't care for Aunt Maud except in so far as he was immediately to show. "How can Mrs. Lowder think me disposed of with any finality, if I'm disposed of only to a girl who's dying? If you're right about that, about the state of the case, you're wrong about Mrs. Lowder's being squared. If Milly, as you say," he lucidly pursued, "can't deceive a great surgeon, or whatever, the great surgeon won't deceive other people—not those, that is, who are closely concerned. He won't at any rate deceive Mrs. Stringham, who's Milly's greatest friend; and it will be very odd if Mrs. Stringham deceives Aunt Maud, who's her own."

Kate showed him at this the cold glow of an idea that really was worth his having kept her for. "Why will it be odd? I marvel at your seeing your way so little."

Mere curiosity even, about his companion, had now for him its quick, its slightly quaking intensities. He had compared her once, we know, to a "new book," an uncut volume of the highest, the rarest quality; and his emotion (to justify that) was again and again like the thrill of turning the page. "Well, you know how deeply I marvel at the way you see it!"

"It doesn't in the least follow," Kate went on, "that anything in the nature of what you call deception on Mrs. Stringham's part will be what you call odd. Why shouldn't she hide the truth?"

"From Mrs. Lowder?" Densher stared. "Why should she?"

"To please you."

"And how in the world can it please me?"

Kate turned her head away as if really at last almost tired of his density. But she looked at him again as she spoke. "Well then to please Milly." And before he could question: "Don't you feel by this time that there's nothing Susan Shepherd won't do for you?"

He had verily after an instant to take it in, so sharply it corresponded with the good lady's recent reception of him. It was queerer than anything again, the way they all came together round him. But that was an old story, and Kate's multiplied lights led him on and on. It was with a reserve, however, that he confessed this. "She's ever so kind. Only her view of the right thing may not be the same as yours."

"How can it be anything different if it's the view of serving you?"

Densher for an instant, but only for an instant, hung fire. "Oh the difficulty is that I don't, upon my honour, even yet quite make out how yours does serve me."

“It helps you—put it then,” said Kate very simply—“to serve *me.* It gains you time.”

“Time for what?”

“For everything!” She spoke at first, once more, with impatience; then as usual she qualified. “For anything that may happen.”

Densher had a smile, but he felt it himself as strained. “You’re cryptic, love!”

It made her keep her eyes on him, and he could thus see that, by one of those incalculable motions in her without which she wouldn’t have been a quarter so interesting, they half-filled with tears from some source he had too roughly touched. “I’m taking a trouble for you I never dreamed I should take for any human creature.”

Oh it went home, making him flush for it; yet he soon enough felt his reply on his lips. “Well, isn’t my whole insistence to you now that I can conjure trouble away?” And he let it, his insistence, come out again; it had so constantly had, all the week, but its step or two to make. “There need be none whatever between us. There need be nothing but our sense of each other.”

It had only the effect at first that her eyes grew dry while she took up again one of the so numerous links in her close chain. “You can tell her anything you like, anything whatever.”

“Mrs. Stringham? I *have* nothing to tell her.”

“You can tell her about *us.* I mean,” she wonderfully pursued, “that you do still like me.”

It was indeed so wonderful that it amused him. “Only not that you still like me.”

She let his amusement pass. “I’m absolutely certain she wouldn’t repeat it.”

“I see. To Aunt Maud.”

“You don’t quite see. Neither to Aunt Maud nor to any one else.” Kate then, he saw, was always seeing Milly much more, after all, than he was; and she showed it again as she went on. *“There,* accordingly, is your time.”

She did at last make him think, and it was fairly as if light broke, though not quite all at once. “You must let me say I do see. Time for something in particular that I understand you regard as possible. Time too that, I further understand, is time for you as well.”

“Time indeed for me as well.” And encouraged visibly by his glow of concentration, she looked at him as through the air she had painfully made clear. Yet she was still on her guard. “Don’t think, however, I’ll do *all* the work for you. If you want things named you must name them.”

He had quite, within the minute, been turning names over; and there was only one, which at last stared at him there dreadful, that properly fitted. “Since she’s to die I’m to marry her?”

It struck him even at the moment as fine in her that she met it with no wincing nor mincing. She might for the grace of silence, for favor to their conditions, have only answered him with her eyes. But her lips bravely moved. “To marry her.”

“So that when her death has taken place I shall in the natural course have money?”

It was before him enough now, and he had nothing more to ask; he had only to turn, on the spot, considerably cold with the thought that all along—to his stupidity, his timidity—it had been, it had been only, what she meant. Now that he was in possession moreover she couldn’t forbear, strangely enough, to pronounce the words she hadn’t pronounced: they broke through her controlled and colourless voice as if she should be ashamed, to the very end, to have flinched. “You’ll in the natural course have money. We shall in the natural course be free.”

“Oh, oh, oh!” Densher softly murmured.

“Yes, yes, yes.” But she broke off. “Come to Lady Wells.”

He never budged—there was too much else. “I’m to propose it then—marriage—on the spot?”

There was no ironic sound he needed to give it; the more simply he spoke the more he seemed ironic. But she remained consummately proof. “Oh I can’t go into that with you, and from the moment you don’t wash your hands of me I don’t think you ought to ask me. You must act as you like and as you can.”

He thought again. “I’m far—as I sufficiently showed you this morning—from washing my hands of you.”

“Then,” said Kate, “it’s all right.”

“All right?” His eagerness flamed. “You’ll come?”

But he had had to see in a moment that it wasn’t what she meant. “You’ll have a free hand, a clear field, a chance—well, quite ideal.”

“Your descriptions”—her “ideal” was such a touch!—“are prodigious. And what I don’t make out is how, caring of me, you can like it.”

“I don’t like it, but I’m a person, thank goodness, who can do what I don’t like.”

It wasn’t till afterwards that, going back to it, he was to read into this speech a kind of heroic ring, a note of character that belittled his own incapacity for action. Yet he saw indeed even at the time the greatness of knowing so well what one wanted. At the time too, moreover, he next reflected that he after all knew what he did. But something else on his lips was uppermost. “What I don’t make out then is how you can even bear it.”

“Well, when you know me better you’ll find out how much I can bear.” And she went on before he could take up, as it were, her too many implications. That it was left to him to know her, spiritually, “better” after his long sacrifice to knowledge—this for instance was a truth he hadn’t been ready to receive so full in the face. She had mystified him enough, heaven knew, but that was rather by his own generosity than by hers. And what, with it, did she seem to suggest she might incur at his hands? In spite of these questions she was carrying him on. “All you’ll have to do will be to stay.”

“And proceed to my business under your eyes?”

“Oh dear no—we shall go.”

“ ‘Go?’ ” he wondered. “Go when, go where?”

“In a day or two—straight home. Aunt Maud wishes it now.”

It gave him all he could take in to think of. “Then what becomes of Miss Theale?”

“What I tell you. She stays on, and you stay with her.”

He stared. “All alone?”

She had a smile that was apparently for his tone. “You’re old enough—with plenty of Mrs. Stringham.”

Nothing might have been so odd for him now, could he have measured it, as his being able to feel, quite while he drew from her these successive cues, that he was essentially “seeing what she would say”—an instinct compatible for him therefore with that absence of a need to know her better to which she had a moment before done injustice. If it hadn’t been appearing to him in gleams that she would somewhere break down, he probably couldn’t have gone on. Still, as she wasn’t breaking down there was nothing for him but to continue. “Is your going Mrs. Lowder’s idea?”

“Very much indeed. Of course again you see what it does for us. And I don’t,” she added, “refer only to our going, but to Aunt Maud’s view of the general propriety of it.”

“I see again, as you say,” Densher said after a moment. “It makes everything fit.”

“Everything.”

The word, for a little, held the air, and he might have seemed the while to be looking, by no means dimly now, at all it stood for. But he had in fact been looking at something else. “You leave her here then to die?”

“Ah she believes she won’t die. Not if you stay. I mean,” Kate explained, “Aunt Maud believes.”

“And that’s all that’s necessary?”

Still indeed she didn’t break down. “Didn’t we long ago agree that what she believes is the principal thing for us?”

He recalled it, under her eyes, but it came as from long ago. “Oh yes. I can’t deny it.” Then he added: “So that if I stay-”

“It won’t”—she was prompt—“be our fault.”

“If Mrs. Lowder still, you mean, suspects us?”

“If she still suspects us. But she won’t.”

Kate gave it an emphasis that might have appeared to leave him nothing more; and he might in fact well have found nothing if he hadn’t presently found: “But what if she doesn’t accept me?”

It produced in her a look of weariness that made the patience of her tone the next moment touch him. “You can but try.”

“Naturally I can but try. Only, you see, one has to try a little hard to propose to a dying girl.”

“She isn’t for you as if she’s dying.” It had determined in Kate the flash of *justesse*[az] he could perhaps most, on consideration, have admired, since her retort touched the truth. There before him was the fact of how Milly to-night impressed him, and his companion, with her eyes in his own and pursuing his impression to the depths of them, literally now perched on the fact in triumph. She turned her head to where their friend was again in range, and it made him turn his, so that they watched a minute in concert. Milly, from the other side, happened at the moment to notice them, and she sent across toward them in response all the candor of her smile, the luster of her pearls, the value of her life, the essence of her wealth. It brought them together again with faces made fairly grave by the reality she put into their plan. Kate herself grew a little pale for it, and they had for a time only a silence. The music, however, gay and vociferous, had broken out afresh and protected more than interrupted them. When Densher at last spoke it was under cover.

“I might stay, you know, without trying.”

“Oh to stay is to try.”

“To have for herself, you mean, the appearance of it?”

“I don’t see how you can have the appearance more.”

Densher waited. “You think it then possible she may *offer* marnage? ”

“I can’t think—if you really want to know—what she may *not* offer!”

“In the manner of princesses, who do such things?”

“In any manner you like. So be prepared.”

Well, he looked as if he almost were. “It will be for me then to accept. But that’s the way it must come.”

Kate’s silence, so far, let it pass; but she presently said: “You’ll, on your honour, stay then?”

His answer made her wait, but when it came it was distinct. “Without you, you mean?”

“Without us.”

“And you yourselves go at latest—?”

“Not later than Thursday.”

It made three days. “Well,” he said, “I’ll stay, on my honour, if you’ll come to me. On *your* honour.”

Again, as before, this made her momentarily rigid, with a rigor out of which, at a loss, she vaguely cast about her. Her rigor was more to him, nevertheless, than all her readiness; for her readiness was the woman herself, and this other thing a mask, a stop-gap and a “dodge.” She cast about, however, as happened, and not for the instant in vain. Her eyes, turned over the room, caught at a pretext. “Lady Wells is tired of waiting: she’s coming—see—to *us.”*

Densher saw in fact, but there was a distance for their visitor to cross, and he still had time. “If you decline to understand me I wholly decline to understand you. I’ll do nothing.”

“Nothing?” It was as if she tried for the minute to plead.

“I’ll do nothing. I’ll go off before you. I’ll go tomorrow.”

He was to have afterwards the sense of her having then, as the phrase was—and for vulgar triumphs too—seen he meant it. She looked again at Lady Wells, who was nearer, but she quickly came back. “And if I do understand?”

“I’ll do everything.”

She found anew a pretext in her approaching friend: he was fairly playing with her pride. He had never, he then knew, tasted, in all his relation with her, of anything so sharp—too sharp for mere sweetness—as the vividness with which he saw himself master in the conflict. “Well, I understand.”

“On your honour?”

“On my honour.”

“You’ll come?”

“I’ll come.”

BOOK NINTH

—I—

It was after they had gone that he truly felt the difference, which was most to be felt moreover in his faded old rooms. He had recovered from the first a part of his attachment to this scene of contemplation, within sight, as it was, of the Rialto bridge, on the hither side of that arch of associations and the left going up the Canal; he had seen it in a particular light, to which, more and more, his mind and his hands adjusted it; but the interest the place now wore for him had risen at a bound, becoming a force that, on the spot, completely engaged and absorbed him, and relief from which—if relief was the name—he could find only by getting away and out of reach. What had come to pass within his walls lingered there as an obsession importunate to all his senses; it lived again, as a cluster of pleasant memories, at every hour and in every object; it made everything but itself irrelevant and tasteless. It remained, in a word, a conscious watchful presence, active on its own side, for ever to be reckoned with, in fact of which the effort at detachment was scarcely less futile than frivolous. Kate had come to him; it was only once—and this not from any failure of their need, but from such impossibilities, for bravery alike and for subtlety, as there was at the last no blinking; yet she had come, that once, to stay, as people called it; and what survived of her, what reminded and insisted, was something he couldn't have banished if he had wished. Luckily he didn't wish, even though there might be for a man almost a shade of the awful in so unqualified a consequence of his act. It had simply *worked*, his idea, the idea he had made her accept; and all erect before him, really covering the ground as far as he could see, was the fact of the gained success that this represented. It was, otherwise, but the fact of the idea as directly applied, as converted from a luminous conception into an historic truth. He had known it before but as desired and urged, as convincingly insisted on for the help it would render; so that at present, *with* the help rendered, it seemed to acknowledge its office and to set up, for memory and faith, an insistence of its own. He had in fine judged his friend's pledge in advance as an inestimable value, and what he must now know his case for was that of a possession of the value to the full. Wasn't it perhaps even rather the value that possessed *him,* kept him thinking of it and waiting on it, turning round and round it and making sure of it again from this side and that?

It played for him—certainly in this prime afterglow—the part of a treasure kept at home in safety and sanctity, something he was sure of finding in its place when, with each return, he worked his heavy old key in the lock. The door had but to open for him to be with it again and for it to be all there; so intensely there that, as we say, no other act was possible to him than the renewed act, almost the hallucination, of intimacy. Wherever he looked or sat or stood, to whatever aspect he gave for the instant the advantage, it was in view as nothing of the moment, nothing begotten of time or of chance could be, or ever would; it was in view as, when the curtain has risen, the play on the stage is in view, night after night, for the fiddlers. He remained thus, in his own theatre, in his single person, perpetual orchestra to the ordered drama, the confirmed "run"; playing low and slow, moreover, in the regular way, for the situations of most importance. No other visitor was to come to him; he met, he bumped occasionally, in the Piazza or in his walks, against claimants to acquaintance, remembered or forgotten, at present mostly effusive, sometimes even inquisitive; but he gave no address and encouraged no approach; he couldn't for his life, he felt, have opened his door to a third person. Such a person would have interrupted him, would have profaned his secret or perhaps have guessed it; would at any rate have broken the spell of what he conceived himself—in the absence of anything "to show"—to be inwardly doing. He was giving himself up—that was quite enough—to the general feeling of his renewed engagement to fidelity. The force of the engagement, the quantity of the article to be supplied, the special solidity of the contract, the way, above all, as a service for which the price named by him had been magnificently paid, his equivalent office was to take effect—such items might well fill his consciousness when there was nothing from outside to interfere. Never was a consciousness more rounded and fastened down over what filled it; which is precisely what we have spoken of as, in its degree, the oppression of success, the somewhat chilled state—tending to the solitary—of supreme recognition. If it was slightly awful to feel so justified, this was by the loss of the warmth of the element of mystery. The lucid reigned instead of it, and it was into the lucid that he sat and stared. He shook himself out of it a dozen times a day, tried to break by his own act his constant still communion. It wasn't still communion she had meant to bequeath him; it was the very different business of that kind of fidelity of which the other name was careful action.

Nothing, he perfectly knew, was less like careful action than the immersion he enjoyed at home. The actual

grand queerness was that to be faithful to Kate he had positively to take his eyes, his arms, his lips straight off her—he had to let her alone. He had to remember it was time to go to the palace—which in truth was a mercy, since the check was not less effectual than imperative. What it came to, fortunately, as yet, was that when he closed the door behind him for an absence he always shut her in. Shut her out—it came to that rather, when once he had got a little away; and before he reached the palace, much more after hearing at his heels the bang of the greater *portone,*[ba] he felt free enough not to know his position as oppressively false. As Kate was *all* in his poor rooms, and not a ghost of her left for the grander, it was only on reflexion that the falseness came out; so long as he left it to the mercy of beneficent chance it offered him no face and made of him no claim that he couldn't meet without aggravation of his inward sense. This aggravation had been his original horror; yet what—in Milly's presence, each day—was horror doing with him but virtually letting him off? He shouldn't perhaps get off to the end; there was time enough still for the possibility of shame to pounce. Still, however, he did constantly a little more what he liked best, and that kept him for the time more safe. What he liked best was, in any case, to know why things were as he felt them; and he knew it pretty well, in this case, ten days after the retreat of his other friends. He then fairly perceived that—even putting their purity of motive at its highest—it was neither Kate nor he who made his strange relation to Milly, who made her own, so far as it might be, innocent; it was neither of them who practically purged it—if practically purged it was. Milly herself did everything—so far at least as he was concerned—Milly herself, and Milly's house, and Milly's hospitality, and Milly's manner, and Milly's character, and, perhaps still more than anything else, Milly's imagination, Mrs. Stringham and Sir Luke indeed a little aiding: whereby he knew the blessing of a fair pretext to ask himself what more he had to do. Something incalculable wrought for them—for him and Kate; something outside, beyond, above themselves, and doubtless ever so much better than they: which wasn't a reason, however—its being so much better—for them not to profit by it. Not to profit by it, so far as profit could be reckoned, would have been to go directly against it; and the spirit of generosity at present engendered in Densher could have felt no greater pang than by his having to go directly against Milly.

To go *with* her was the thing, so far as she could herself go; which, from the moment her tenure of her loved palace stretched on, was possible but by his remaining near her. This remaining was of course on the face of it the most "marked" of demonstrations—which was exactly why Kate had required it; it was so marked that on the very evening of the day it had taken effect Milly herself hadn't been able not to reach out to him, with an exquisite awkwardness, for some account of it. It was as if she had wanted from him some name that, now they were to be almost alone together, they could, for their further ease, know it and call it by—it being, after all, almost rudimentary that his presence, of which the absence of the others made quite a different thing, couldn't but have for himself some definite basis. She only wondered about the basis it would have for himself, and how he would describe it; that would quite do for her—it even would have done for her, he could see, had he produced some reason merely trivial, had he said he was waiting for money or clothes, for letters or for orders from Fleet Street, without which, as she might have heard, newspaper men never took a step. He hadn't in the event quite sunk to that; but he had none the less had there with her, that night, on Mrs. Stringham's leaving them alone—Mrs. Stringham proved really prodigious—his acquaintance with a shade of awkwardness darker than any Milly could know. He had supposed himself beforehand, on the question of what he was doing or pretending, in possession of some tone that would serve; but there were three minutes of his feeling incapable of promptness quite in the same degree in which a gentleman whose pocket has been picked feels incapable of purchase. It even didn't help him, oddly, that he was sure Kate would in some way have spoken for him—or rather not so much in some way as in one very particular way. He hadn't asked her, at the last, what she might, in the connexion, have said; nothing would have induced him to put such a question after she had been to see him: his lips were so sealed by that passage, his spirit in fact so hushed, in respect to any charge upon her freedom. There was something he could only therefore read back into the probabilities, and when he left the palace an hour afterwards it was with a sense of having breathed there, in the very air, the truth he had been guessing.

Just this perception it was, however, that had made him for the time ugly to himself in his awkwardness. It was horrible, with this creature, to *be* awkward; it was odious to be seeking excuses for the relation that involved it. Any relation that involved it was by the very fact as much discredited as a dish would be at dinner if one had to take medicine as a sauce. What Kate would have said in one of the young women's last talks was that—if Milly absolutely must have the truth about it—Mr. Densher was staying because she had really seen no way but to require it of him. If he stayed he didn't follow her—or didn't appear to her aunt to be doing so; and when she kept him from following her Mrs. Lowder couldn't pretend, in scenes, the renewal of which at this time of day was painful, that she after all didn't snub him as she might. She did nothing in fact but snub him—wouldn't that have been part of the story?—only Aunt Maud's suspicions were of the sort that had repeatedly to be dealt with. He had been, by the same token, reasonable enough—as he now, for that matter, well might; he had consented to oblige them, aunt and niece, by giving the plainest sign possible that he could exist away from London. To exist away from London was to exist away from Kate Croy—which was a gain, much appreciated, to the latter's comfort. There was a minute, at this hour, out of Densher's three, during which he knew the terror of Milly's uttering some such allusion to their friend's explanation as he must meet

with words that wouldn't destroy it. To destroy it was to destroy everything, to destroy probably Kate herself, to destroy in particular by a breach of faith still uglier than anything else the beauty of their own last passage. He had given her his word of honour that if she would come to him he would act absolutely in her sense, and he had done so with a full enough vision of what her sense implied. What it implied for one thing was that to-night in the great saloon, noble in its half-lighted beauty, and straight in the white face of his young hostess, divine in her trust, or at any rate inscrutable in her mercy—what it implied was that he should lie with his lips. The single thing, of all things, that could save him from it would be Milly's letting him off after having thus scared him. What made her mercy inscrutable was that if she had already more than once saved him it was yet apparently without knowing how nearly he was lost.

These were transcendent motions, not the less blest for being obscure; whereby yet once more he was to feel the pressure lighten. He was kept on his feet in short by the felicity of her not presenting him with Kate's version as a version to adopt. He couldn't stand up to lie—he felt as if he should have to go down on his knees. As it was he just sat there shaking a little for nervousness the leg he had crossed over the other. She was sorry for his suffered snub, but he had nothing more to subscribe to, to perjure himself about, than the three or four inanities he had, on his own side, feebly prepared for the crisis. He scrambled a little higher than the reference to money and clothes, letters and directions from his manager; but he brought out the beauty of the chance for him—there before him like a temptress painted by Titian—to do a little quiet writing. He was vivid for a moment on the difficulty of writing quietly in London; and he was precipitate, almost explosive, on his idea, long cherished, of a book.

The explosion lighted her face. "You'll do your book here?"

"I hope to begin it."

"It's something you haven't begun?"

"Well, only just."

"And since you came?"

She was so full of interest that he shouldn't perhaps after all be too easily let off. "I tried to think a few days ago that I had broken ground."

Scarcely anything, it was indeed clear, could have let him in deeper. "I'm afraid we've made an awful mess of your time."

"Of course you have. But what I'm hanging on for now is precisely to repair that ravage."

"Then you mustn't mind me, you know."

"You'll see," he tried to say with ease, "how little I shall mind anything."

"You'll want"—Milly had thrown herself into it—"the best part of your days."

He thought a moment: he did what he could to wreathe it in smiles. "Oh I shall make shift with the worst part. The best will be for *you*." And he wished Kate could hear him. It didn't help him moreover that he visibly, even pathetically, imaged to her by such touches his quest for comfort against discipline. He was to bury Kate's so signal snub, and also the hard law she had now laid on him, under a high intellectual effort. This at least was his crucifixion—that Milly was so interested. She was so interested that she presently asked him if he found his rooms propitious, while he felt that in just decently answering her he put on a brazen mask. He should need it quite particularly were she to express again her imagination of coming to tea with him—an extremity that he saw he was not to be spared. "We depend on you, Susie and I, you know, not to forget we're coming"—the extremity was but to face that remainder, yet it demanded all his tact. Facing their visit itself—to that, no matter what he might have to do, he would never consent, as we know, to be pushed; and this even though it might be exactly such a demonstration as would figure for him at the top of Kate's list of his proprieties. He could wonder freely enough, deep within, if Kate's view of that especial propriety had not been modified by a subsequent occurrence; but his deciding that it was quite likely not to have been had no effect on his own preference for tact. It pleased him to think of "tact" as his present prop in doubt; that glossed his predicament over, for it was of application among the sensitive and the kind. He wasn't inhuman, in fine, so long as it would serve. It had to serve now, accordingly, to help him not to sweeten Milly's hopes. He didn't want to be rude to them, but he still less wanted them to flower again in the particular connexion; so that, casting about him in his anxiety for a middle way to meet her, he put his foot, with unhappy effect, just in the wrong place. "Will it be safe for you to break into your custom of not leaving the house?"

"'Safe'—?" She had for twenty seconds an exquisite pale glare. Oh but he didn't need it, by that time, to wince; he had winced for himself as soon as he had made his mistake. He had done what, so unforgettably, she had asked him in London not to do; he had touched, all alone with her here, the supersensitive nerve of which she had warned him. He had not, since the occasion in London, touched it again till now; but he saw

himself freshly warned that it was able to bear still less. So for the moment he knew as little what to do as he had ever known it in his life. He couldn't emphasize that he thought of her as dying, yet he couldn't pretend he thought of her as indifferent to precautions. Meanwhile too she had narrowed his choice. "You suppose me so awfully bad?"

He turned, in his pain, within himself; but by the time the colour had mounted to the roots of his hair he had found what he wanted. "I'll believe whatever you tell me."

"Well then, I'm splendid."

"Oh I don't need you to tell me that."

"I mean I'm capable of life."

"I've never doubted it."

"I mean," she went on, "that I want so to live—!"

"Well?" he asked while she paused with the intensity of it.

"Well, that I know I *can."*

"Whatever you do?" He shrank from solemnity about it.

"Whatever I do. If I want to."

"If you want to do it?"

"If I want to live. I *can,"* Milly repeated.

He had clumsily brought it on himself, but he hesitated with all the pity of it. "Ah then *that* I believe."

"I will, I will," she declared; yet with the weight of it somehow turned for him to mere light and sound.

He felt himself smiling through a mist. "You simply must!"

It brought her straight again to the fact. "Well then, if you say it, why mayn't we pay you our visit?"

"Will it help you to live?"

"Every little helps," she laughed, "and it's very little for me, in general, to stay at home. Only I shan't want to miss it—!"

"Yes?"—she had dropped again.

"Well, on the day you give us a chance."

It was amazing what so brief an exchange had at this point done with him. His great scruple suddenly broke, giving way to something inordinately strange, something of a nature to become clear to him only when he had left her. "You can come," he said, "when you like."

What had taken place for him, however—the drop, almost with violence, of everything but a sense of her own reality—apparently showed in his face or his manner, and even so vividly that she could take it for something else. "I see how you feel—that I'm an awful bore about it and that, sooner than have any such upset, you'll go. So it's no matter."

"No matter? Oh!"—he quite protested now.

"If it drives you away to escape us. We want you not to go."

It was beautiful how she spoke for Mrs. Stringham. Whatever it was, at any rate, he shook his head. "I won't go."

"Then *I* won't go!" she brightly declared.

"You mean you won't come to me?"

"No—never now. It's over. But it's all right. I mean, apart from that," she went on, "that I won't do anything I oughtn't or that I'm not forced to."

"Oh who can ever force you?" he asked with his hand-to-mouth way, at all times, of speaking for her encouragement. "You're the least coercible of creatures."

"Because, you think, I'm so free?"

"The freest person probably now in the world. You've got everything."

“Well,” she smiled, “call it so. I don’t complain.”

On which again, in spite of himself, it let him in. “No I know you don’t complain.”

As soon as he had said it he had himself heard the pity in it. His telling her she had “everything” was extravagant kind humour, whereas his knowing so tenderly that she didn’t complain was terrible kind gravity. Milly felt, he could see, the difference; he might as well have praised her outright for looking death in the face. This was the way she just looked *him* again, and it was of no attenuation that she took him up more gently than ever. “It isn’t a merit-when one sees one’s way.”

“To peace and plenty? Well, I dare say not.”

“I mean to keeping what one has.”

“Oh that’s success. If what one has is good,” Densher said at random, “it’s enough to try for.”

“Well, it’s my limit. I’m not trying for more.” To which then she added with a change: “And now about your book.”

“My book—?” He had got in a moment so far from it.

“The one you’re now to understand that nothing will induce either Susie or me to run the risk of spoiling.”

He cast about, but he made up his mind. “I’m not doing a book.”

“Not what you said?” she asked in a wonder. “You’re not writing?”

He already felt relieved. “I don’t know, upon my honour, what I’m doing.”

It made her visibly grave; so that, disconcerted in another way, he was afraid of what she would see in it. She saw in fact exactly what he feared, but again his honour, as he called it, was saved even while she didn’t know she had threatened it. Taking his words for a betrayal of the sense that he, on his side, *might* complain, what she clearly wanted was to urge on him some such patience as he should be perhaps able to arrive at with her indirect help. Still more clearly, however, she wanted to be sure of how far she might venture; and he could see her make out in a moment that she had a sort of test.

“Then if it’s not for your book—?”

“What *am* I staying for?”

“I mean with your London work—with all you have to do. Isn’t it rather empty for you?”

“Empty for me?” He remembered how Kate had held that she might propose marriage, and he wondered if this were the way she would naturally begin it. It would leave him, such an incident, he already felt, at a loss, and the note of his finest anxiety might have been in the vagueness of his reply. “Oh well—!”

“I ask too many questions?” She settled it for herself before he could protest. “You stay because you’ve got to.”

He grasped at it. “I stay because I’ve got to.” And he couldn’t have said when he had uttered it if it were loyal to Kate or disloyal. It gave her, in a manner, away; it showed the tip of the ear of her plan. Yet Milly took it, he perceived, but as a plain statement of his truth. He was waiting for what Kate would have told her of—the permission from Lancaster Gate to come any nearer. To remain friends with either niece or aunt he mustn’t stir without it. All this Densher read in the girl’s sense of the spirit of his reply; so that it made him feel he was lying, and he had to think of something to correct that. What he thought of was, in an instant, “Isn’t it enough, whatever you may be one’s other complications, to stay after all for *you?”*

“Oh you must judge.”

He was by this time on his feet to take leave, and was also at last too restless. The speech in question at least wasn’t disloyal to Kate; that was the very tone of their bargain. So was it, by being loyal, another kind of lie, the lie of the uncandid profession of a motive. He was staying so little “for” Milly that he was staying positively against her. He didn’t, none the less, know, and at last, thank goodness, didn’t care. The only thing he could say might make it either better or worse. “Well then, so long as I don’t go, you must think of me all *as* judging!”

—II—

He didn't go home, on leaving her—he didn't want to; he walked instead, through his narrow ways and his *campi* with gothic arches, to a small and comparatively sequestered café where he had already more than once found refreshment and comparative repose, together with solutions that consisted mainly and pleasantly of further indecisions. It was a literal fact that those awaiting him there to-night, while he leaned back on his velvet bench with his head against a florid mirror and his eyes not looking further than the fumes of his tobacco, might have been regarded by him as a little less limp than usual. This wasn't because, before getting to his feet again, there was a step he had seen his way to; it was simply because the acceptance of his position took sharper effect from his sense of what he had just had to deal with. When half an hour before, at the palace, he had turned about to Milly on the question of the impossibility so inwardly felt, turned about on the spot and under her eyes, he had acted, by the sudden force of his seeing much further, seeing how little, how not at all, impossibilities mattered. It wasn't a case for pedantry; when people were at her pass everything was allowed. And her pass was now, as by the sharp click of a spring, just completely his own—to the extent, as he felt, of her deep dependence on him. Anything he should do or shouldn't would have close reference to her life, which was thus absolutely in his hands—and ought never to have reference to anything else. It was on the cards for him that he might kill her—that was the way he read the cards as he sat in his customary corner. The fear in this thought made him let everything go, kept him there actually, all motionless, for three hours on end. He renewed his consumption and smoked more cigarettes than he had ever done in the time. What had come out for him had come out, with this first intensity, as a terror; so that action itself, of any sort, the right as well as the wrong—if the difference even survived—had heard it in a vivid "Hush!" the injunction to keep from that moment intensely still. He thought in fact while his vigil lasted of several different ways for his doing so, and the hour might have served him as a lesson in going on tiptoe.

What he finally took home, when he ventured to leave the place, was the perceived truth that he might on any other system go straight to destruction. Destruction was represented for him by the idea of his really bringing to a point, on Milly's side, anything whatever. Nothing so "brought," he easily argued, but *must* be in one way or another a catastrophe. He was mixed up in her fate, or her fate, if that should be better, was mixed up in *him,* so that a single false motion might either way snap the coil. They helped him, it was true, these considerations, to a degree of eventual peace, for what they luminously amounted to was that he was to do nothing, and that fell in after all with the burden laid on him by Kate. He was only not to budge without the girl's leave—not, oddly enough at the last, to move without it, whether further or nearer, any more than without Kate's. It was to this his wisdom reduced itself—to the need again simply to be kind. That was the same as being still—as studying to create the minimum of vibration. He felt himself as he smoked shut up to a room on the wall of which something precious was too precariously hung. A false step would bring it down, and it must hang as long as possible. He was aware when he walked away again that even Fleet Street wouldn't at this juncture successfully touch him. His manager might wire that he was wanted, but he could easily be deaf to his manager. His money for the idle life might be none too much; happily, however, Venice was cheap, and it was moreover the queer fact that Milly in a manner supported him. The greatest of his expenses really was to walk to the palace to dinner. He didn't want, in short, to give that up, and he should probably be able, he felt, to stay his breath and his hand. He should be able to be still enough through everything.

He tried that for three weeks, with the sense after a little of not having failed. There had to be a delicate art in it, for he wasn't trying—quite the contrary—to be either distant or dull. That would not have been being "nice," which in its own form was the real law. That too might just have produced the vibration he desired to avert; so that he best kept everything in place by not hesitating or fearing, as it were, to let himself go—go in the direction, that is to say, of staying. It depended on where he went; which was what he meant by taking care. When one went on tiptoe one could turn off for retreat without betraying the maneuver. Perfect tact—the necessity for which he had from the first, as we know, happily recognized—was to keep all intercourse in the key of the absolutely settled. It was settled thus for instance that they were indissoluble good friends, and settled as well that her being the American girl was, just in time and for the relation they found themselves concerned in, a boon inappreciable. If, at least, as the days went on, she was to fall short of her prerogative of the great national, the great maidenly ease, if she didn't divinely and responsively desire and labour to record herself as possessed of it, this wouldn't have been for want of Densher's keeping her, with his idea, well up to it—wouldn't have been in fine for want of his encouragement and reminder. He didn't perhaps in so many words speak to her of the quantity itself as of the thing she was least to intermit; but he talked of it, freely, in what he flattered himself was an impersonal way, and this held it there before her—since he was careful also to talk pleasantly. It was at once their idea, when all was said, and the most marked of their conveniences. The type was so elastic that it could be stretched to almost anything; and yet, not stretched, it kept down, remained normal, remained properly within bounds. And he *had* meanwhile, thank goodness, without being too much disconcerted, the sense, for the girl's part of the business, of the queerest conscious compliance, of her doing very much what he wanted, even though without her quite seeing why. She fairly touched this once in saying: "Oh yes, you like us to be as we are because it's a kind of facilitation to you that we don't quite measure: I think one would have to be English to measure it!"—and that too, strangely enough,

without prejudice to her good nature. She might have been conceived as doing—that is of being—what he liked in order perhaps only to judge where it would take them. They really as it went on *saw* each other at the game; she knowing he tried to keep her in tune with his conception, and he knowing she thus knew it. Add that he again knew she knew, and yet that nothing was spoiled by it, and we get a fair impression of the line they found most completely workable. The strangest fact of all for us must be that the success he himself thus promoted was precisely what figured to his gratitude as the something above and beyond him, above and beyond Kate, that made for daily decency. There would scarce have been felicity—certainly too little of the right lubricant—had not the national character so invoked been, not less inscrutably than entirely, in Milly's chords. It made up her unity and was the one thing he could unlimitedly take for granted.

He did so then, daily, for twenty days, without deepened fear of the undue vibration that was keeping him watchful. He knew in his nervousness that he was living at best from day to day and from hand to mouth; yet he had succeeded, he believed, in avoiding a mistake. All women had alternatives, and Milly's would doubtless be shaky too; but the national character was firm in her, whether as all of her, practically, by this time, or but as a part; the national character that, in a woman still so young, made of the air breathed a virtual non-conductor. It wasn't till a certain occasion when the twenty days had passed that, going to the palace at tea-time, he was met by the information that the signorina padrona[bb] was not "receiving." The announcement met him, in the court, on the lips of one of the gondoliers, met him, he thought, with such a conscious eye as the knowledge of his freedoms of access, hitherto conspicuously shown, could scarce fail to beget. Densher had not been at Palazzo Leporelli among the mere receivable, but had taken his place once for all among the involved and included, so that on being so flagrantly braved he recognized after a moment the propriety of a further appeal. Neither of the two ladies, it appeared, received, and yet Pasquale was not prepared to say that either was *poco bene.*[bc] He was yet not prepared to say that either was anything, and he would have been blank, Densher mentally noted, if the term could ever apply to members of a race in whom vacancy was but a nest of darknesses—not a vain surface, but a place of withdrawal in which something obscure, something always ominous, indistinguishably lived. He felt afresh indeed at this hour the force of the veto laid within the palace on any mention, any cognition, of the liabilities of its mistress. The state of her health was never confessed to there as a reason. How much it might deeply be taken for one was another matter; of which he grew fully aware on carrying his question further. This appeal was to his friend Eugenio, whom he immediately sent for, with whom, for three rich minutes, protected from the weather, he was confronted in the gallery that led from the water-steps to the court, and whom he always called, in meditation, his friend; seeing it was so elegantly presumable he would have put an end to him if he could. That produced a relation which required a name of its own, an intimacy of consciousness in truth for each—an intimacy of eye, of ear, of general sensibility, of everything but tongue. It had been, in other words, for the five weeks, far from occult to our young man that Eugenio took a view of him not less finely formal than essentially vulgar, but which at the same time he couldn't himself raise an eyebrow to prevent. It was all in the air now again; it was as much between them as ever while Eugenio waited on him in the court.

The weather, from early morning, had turned to storm, the first sea-storm of the autumn, and Densher had almost invidiously brought him down the outer staircase—the massive ascent, the great feature of the court, to Milly's *piano nobile.*[bd] This was to pay him—it was the one chance—for all imputations; the imputation in particular that, clever, *tanto bello*[be] and not rich, the young man from London was—by the obvious way—pressing Miss Theale's fortune hard. It was to pay him for the further ineffable intimation that a gentleman must take the young lady's most devoted servant (interested scarcely less in the high attraction) for a strangely casual appendage if he counted in such a connexion on impunity and prosperity. These interpretations were odious to Densher for the simple reason that they might have been so true of the attitude of an inferior man, and three things alone, accordingly, had kept him from righting himself. One of these was that his critic sought expression only in an impersonality, a positive inhumanity, of politeness ; the second was that refinements of expression in a friend's servant were not a thing a visitor could take action on; and the third was the fact that the particular attribution of motive did him after all no wrong. It was his own fault if the vulgar view, the view that might have been taken of an inferior man, happened so incorrigibly to fit him. He apparently wasn't so different from inferior men as that came to. If therefore, in fine, Eugenio figured to him as "my friend" because he was conscious of his seeing so much of him, what he made him see on the same lines in the course of their present interview was ever so much more. Densher felt that he marked himself, no doubt, as insisting, by dissatisfaction with the gondolier's answer, on the pursuit taken for granted in him; and yet felt it only in the augmented, the exalted distance that was by this time established between them. Eugenio had of course reflected that a word to Miss Theale from such a pair of lips would cost him his place; but he could also bethink himself that, so long as the word never came—and it was, on the basis he had arranged, impossible—he enjoyed the imagination of mounting guard. He had never so mounted guard, Densher could see, as during these minutes in the damp loggia where the storm-gusts were strong; and there came in fact for our young man, as a result of his presence, a sudden sharp sense that everything had turned to the dismal. Something had happened—he didn't know what; and it wasn't Eugenio who would tell him. What Eugenio told him was that he thought the ladies—as if their liability had been equal—were a "leetle"

fatigued, just a “leetle leetle,” and without any cause named for it. It was one of the signs of what Densher felt in him that, by a profundity, a true deviltry of resource, he always met the latter’s Italian with English and his English with Italian. He now, as usual, slightly smiled at him in the process—but ever so slightly this time, his manner also being attuned, our young man made out, to the thing, whatever it was, that constituted the rupture of peace.

This manner, while they stood a long minute facing each other over all they didn’t say, played a part as well in the sudden jar to Densher’s protected state. It was a Venice all of evil that had broken out for them alike, so that they were together in their anxiety, if they really could have met on it; a Venice of cold lashing rain from a low black sky, of wicked wind raging through narrow passes, of general arrest and interruption, with the people engaged in all the water-life huddled, stranded and wageless, bored and cynical, under archways and bridges. Our young man’s mute exchange with his friend contained meanwhile such a depth of reference that, had the pressure been but slightly prolonged, they might have reached a point at which they were equally weak. Each had verily something in mind that would have made a hash of mutual suspicion and in presence of which, as possibility, they were more united than disjoined. But it was to have been a moment for Densher that nothing could ease off—not even the formal propriety with which his interlocutor finally attended him to the *portone* and bowed upon his retreat. Nothing had passed about his coming back, and the air had made itself felt as a nonconductor of messages. Densher knew of course, as he took his way again, that Eugenio’s invitation to return was not what he missed; yet he knew at the same time that what had happened to him was part of his punishment. Out in the square beyond the *fondamenta*[bf] that gave access to the landgate of the palace, out where the wind was higher, he fairly, with the thought of it, pulled his umbrella closer down. It couldn’t be, his consciousness, unseen enough by others—the base predicament of having, by a concatenation, just to *take* such things: such things as the fact that one very acute person in the world, whom he couldn’t dispose of as an interested scoundrel, enjoyed an opinion of him that there was no attacking, no disproving, no (what was worst of all) even noticing. One had come to a queer pass when a servant’s opinion so mattered. Eugenio’s would have mattered even if, as founded on a low vision of appearances, it had been quite wrong. It was the more disagreeable accordingly that the vision of appearances was quite right, and yet was scarcely less low.

Such as it was, at any rate, Densher shook it off with the more impatience that he was independently restless. He had to walk in spite of weather, and he took his course, through crooked ways, to the Piazza, where he should have the shelter of the galleries. Here, in the high arcade, half Venice was crowded close, while, on the Molo, at the limit of the expanse, the old columns of the Saint Theodore and of the Lion were the frame of a door wide open to the storm. It was odd for him, as he moved, that it should have made such a difference—if the difference wasn’t only that the palace had for the first time failed of a welcome. There was more, but it came from that; that gave the harsh note and broke the spell. The wet and the cold were now to reckon with, and it was to Densher precisely as if he had seen the obliteration, at a stroke, of the margin on a faith in which they were all living. The margin had been his name for it—for the thing that, though it had held out, could bear no shock. The shock, in some form, had come, and he wondered about it while, threading his way among loungers as vague as himself, he dropped his eyes sightlessly on the rubbish in shops. There were stretches of the gallery paved with squares of red marble, greasy now with the salt spray; and the whole place, in its huge elegance, the grace of its conception and the beauty of its detail, was more than ever like a great drawing-room, the drawing-room of Europe, profaned and bewildered by some reverse of fortune. He brushed shoulders with brown men whose hats askew, and the loose sleeves of whose pendent jackets, made them resemble melancholy maskers. The tables and chairs that overflowed from the cafés were gathered, still with a pretense of service, into the arcade, and here and there a spectacled German, with his coat-collar up, partook publicly of food and philosophy. These were impressions for Densher too, but he had made the whole circuit thrice before he stopped short, in front of Florian’s with the force of his sharpest. His eye had caught a face within the café—he had spotted an acquaintance behind the glass. The person he had thus paused long enough to look at twice was seated, well within range, at a small table on which a tumbler, half-emptied and evidently neglected, still remained; and though he had on his knee, as he leaned back, a copy of a French newspaper—the heading of the *Figaro* was visible—he stared straight before him at the little opposite rococo wall. Densher had him for a minute in profile, had him for a time during which his identity produced, however quickly, all the effect of establishing connexions—connexions startling and direct; and then, as if it were the one thing more needed, seized the look, determined by a turn of the head, that might have been a prompt result of the sense of being noticed. This wider view showed him *all* Lord Mark—Lord Mark as encountered, several weeks before, the day of the first visit of each to Palazzo Leporelli. For it had been all Lord Mark that was going out, on that occasion, as he came in—he had felt it, in the hall, at the time; and he was accordingly the less at a loss to recognize in a few seconds, as renewed meeting brought it to the surface, the same potential quantity.

It was a matter, the whole passage—it could only be—but of a few seconds; for as he might neither stand there to stare nor on the other hand make any advance from it, he had presently resumed his walk, this time to another pace. It had been for all the world, during his pause, as if he had caught his answer to the riddle of

the day. Lord Mark had simply faced him—as he had faced *him,* not placed by him, not at first—as one of the damp shuffling crowd. Recognition, though hanging fire, had then clearly come; yet no light of salutation had been struck from these certainties. Acquaintance between them was scant enough for neither to take it up. That neither had done so was not, however, what now mattered, but that the gentleman at Florian's should be in the place at all. He couldn't have been in it long; Densher, as inevitably a haunter of the great meeting-ground, would in that case have seen him before. He paid short visits; he was on the wing; the question for him even as he sat there was of his train or of his boat. He had come back for something—as a sequel to his earlier visit; and whatever he had come back for it had had time to be done. He might have arrived but last night or that morning; he had already made the difference. It was a great thing for Densher to get this answer. He held it close, he hugged it, quite leaned on it as he continued to circulate. It kept him going and going—it made him no less restless. But it explained—and that was much, for with explanations he might somehow deal. The vice in the air, otherwise, was too much like the breath of fate. The weather had changed, the rain was ugly, the wind wicked, the sea impossible because of Lord Mark. It was because of him, a *fortiori,* that the palace was closed. Densher went round again twice; he found the visitor each time as he had found him first. Once, that is, he was staring before him; the next time he was looking over his *Figaro,* which he had opened out. Densher didn't again stop, but left him apparently unconscious of his passage—on another repetition of which Lord Mark had disappeared. He had spent but the day; he would be off that night; he had now gone to his hotel for arrangements. These things were as plain to Densher as if he had had them in words. The obscure had cleared for him—if cleared it was; there was something he didn't see, the great thing; but he saw so round it and so close to it that this was almost as good. He had been looking at a man who had done what he had come for, and for whom, as done, it temporarily sufficed. The man had come again to see Milly, and Milly had received him. His visit would have taken place just before or just after luncheon, and it was the reason why he himself had found her door shut.

He said to himself that evening, he still said even on the morrow, that he only wanted a reason, and that with this perception of one he could now mind, as he called it, his business. His business, he had settled, as we know, was to keep thoroughly still; and he asked himself why it should prevent this that he could feel, in connexion with the crisis, so remarkably blameless. He gave the appearances before him all the benefit of being critical, so that if blame were to accrue he shouldn't feel he had dodged it. But it wasn't a bit he who, that day, had touched her, and if she was upset it wasn't a bit his act. The ability so to think about it amounted for Densher during several hours to a kind of exhilaration. The exhilaration was heightened fairly, besides, by the visible conditions—sharp, striking, ugly to him—of Lord Mark's return. His constant view of it, for all the next hours, of which there were many, was as a demonstration on the face of it sinister even to his own actual ignorance. He didn't need, for seeing it as evil, seeing it as, to a certainty, in a high degree "nasty," to know more about it than he had so easily and so wonderfully picked up. You couldn't drop on the poor girl that way without, by the fact, being brutal. Such a visit was a descent, an invasion, an aggression, constituting precisely one or other of the stupid shocks he himself had so decently sought to spare her. Densher had indeed drifted by the next morning to the reflexion—which he positively, with occasion, might have brought straight out—that the only delicate and honourable way of treating a person in such a state was to treat her as he, Merton Densher, did. With time, actually—for the impression but deepened—this sense of the contrast, to the advantage of Merton Densher, became a sense of relief, and that in turn a sense of escape. It was for all the world—and he drew a long breath on it—as if a special danger for him had passed. Lord Mark had, without in the least intending such a service, got it straight out of the way. It was he, the brute, who had stumbled into just the wrong inspiration and who had therefore produced, for the very person he had wished to hurt, an impunity that was comparative innocence, that was almost like purification. The person he had wished to hurt could only be the person so unaccountably hanging about. To keep still meanwhile was, for this person, more comprehensively, to keep it all up; and to keep it all up was, if that seemed on consideration best, not, for the day or two, to go back to the palace.

The day or two passed—stretched to three days; and with the effect, extraordinarily, that Densher felt himself in the course of them washed but the more clean. Some sign would come if his return should have the better effect; and he was at all events, in absence, without the particular scruple. It wouldn't have been meant for him by either of the women that he was to come back but to face Eugenio. That was impossible—the being again denied; for it made him practically answerable, and answerable was what he wasn't. There was no neglect either in absence, inasmuch as, from the moment he didn't get in, the one message he could send up would be some hope on the score of health. Since accordingly that sort of expression was definitely forbidden him he had only to wait—which he was actually helped to do by his feeling with the lapse of each day more and more wound up to it. The days in themselves were anything but sweet; the wind and the weather lasted, the fireless cold hinted at worse; the broken charm of the world about was broken into smaller pieces. He walked up and down his rooms and listened to the wind—listened also to tinkles of bells and watched for some servant of the palace. He might get a note, but the note never came; there were hours when he stayed at home not to miss it. When he wasn't at home he was in circulation again as he had been at the hour of his seeing Lord Mark. He strolled about the Square with the herd of refugees; he raked the approaches and the

cafés on the chance the brute, as he now regularly imaged him, *might* be still there. He could only be there, he knew, to be received afresh; and that—one had but to think of it—would be indeed stiff. He had gone, however—it was proved; though Densher's care for the question either way only added to what was most acrid in the taste of his present ordeal. It all came round to what he was doing for Milly—spending days that neither relief nor escape could purge of a smack of the abject. What was it but abject for a man of his parts to be reduced to such pastimes? What was it but sordid for him, shuffling about in the rain, to have to peep into shops and to consider possible meetings? What was it but odious to find himself wondering what, as between him and another man, a possible meeting would produce? There recurred moments when in spite of everything he felt no straighter than another man. And yet even on the third day, when still nothing had come, he more than ever knew that he wouldn't have budged for the world.

He thought of the two women, in their silence, at last—he at all events thought of Milly—as probably, for her reasons, now intensely wishing him to go. The cold breath of her reasons was, with everything else, in the air; but he didn't care for them any more than for her wish itself, and he would stay in spite of her, stay in spite of odium, stay in spite perhaps of some final experience that would be, for the pain of it, all but unbearable. That would be his one way, purified though he was, to mark his virtue beyond any mistake. It would be accepting the disagreeable, and the disagreeable would be a proof; a proof of his not having stayed for the thing—the agreeable, as it were—that Kate had named. The thing Kate had named was not to have been the odium of staying in spite of hints. It was part of the odium as actual too that Kate was, for her comfort, just now well aloof. These were the first hours since her flight in which his sense of what she had done for him on the eve of that event was to incur a qualification. It was strange, it was perhaps base, to be thinking such things so soon; but one of the intimations of his solitude was that she had provided for herself. She was out of it all, by her act, as much as he was in it; and this difference grew, positively, as his own intensity increased. She had said in their last sharp snatch of talk—sharp though thickly muffled, and with every word in it final and deep, unlike even the deepest words they had ever yet spoken: "Letters? Never-now. Think of it. Impossible." So that as he had sufficiently caught her sense—into which he read, all the same, a strange inconsequence—they had practically wrapped their understanding in the breach of their correspondence. He had moreover, on losing her, done justice to her law of silence; for there was doubtless a finer delicacy in his not writing to her than in his writing as he must have written had he spoken of themselves. That would have been a turbid strain, and her idea had been to be noble; which, in a degree, was a manner. Only it left her, for the pinch, comparatively at ease. And it left *him,* in the conditions, peculiarly alone. He was alone, that is, till, on the afternoon of his third day, in gathering dusk and renewed rain, with his shabby rooms looking doubtless, in their confirmed dreariness, for the mere eyes of others, at their worst, the grinning padrona threw open the door and introduced Mrs. Stringham. That made at a bound a difference, especially when he saw that his visitor was weighted. It appeared part of her weight that she was in a wet waterproof, that she allowed her umbrella to be taken from her by the good woman without consciousness or care, and that her face, under her veil, richly rosy with the driving wind, was—and the veil too—as splashed as if the rain were her tears.

—III—

They came to it almost immediately; he was to wonder afterwards at the fewness of their steps. "She has turned her face to the wall."

"You mean she's worse?"

The poor lady stood there as she had stopped; Densher had, in instant flare of his eagerness, his curiosity, all responsive at sight of her, waved away, on the spot, the padrona, who had offered to relieve her of her mackintosh. She looked vaguely about through her wet veil, intensely alive now to the step she had taken and wishing it not to have been in the dark, but clearly, as yet, seeing nothing. "I don't know *how* she is—and it's why I've come to you."

"I'm glad enough you've come," he said, "and it's quite—you make me feel—as if I had been wretchedly waiting for you."

She showed him again her blurred eyes—she had caught at his word. "Have you been wretched?"

Now, however, on his lips, the word expired. It would have sounded for him like a complaint, and before something he already made out in his visitor he knew his own trouble as small. Hers, under her damp draperies, which shamed his lack of a fire, was great, and he felt she had brought it all with her. He answered that he had been patient and above all that he had been still. "As still as a mouse—you'll have seen it for yourself. Stiller, for three days together, than I've ever been in my life. It has seemed to me the only thing."

This qualification of it as a policy or a remedy was straightway for his friend, he saw, a light that her own light could answer. “It has been best. I’ve wondered for you. But it has been best,” she said again.

“Yet it has done no good?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been afraid you were gone.” Then as he gave a headshake which, though slow, was deeply mature: “You won’t go?

“Is to ‘go,’” he asked, “to be still?”

“Oh I mean if you’ll stay for me.”

“I’ll do anything for you. Isn’t it for you alone now I can?”

She thought of it, and he could see even more of the relief she was taking from him. His presence, his face, his voice, the old rooms themselves, so meagre yet so charged, where Kate had admirably been to him—these things counted for her, now she had them, as the help she had been wanting: so that she still only stood there taking them all in. With it however popped up characteristically a throb of her conscience. What she thus tasted was almost a personal joy. It told Densher of the three days she on her side had spent. “Well, anything you do for me—*is* for her too. Only, only—!”

“Only nothing now matters?”

She looked at him a minute as if he were the fact itself that he expressed. “Then you know?”

“Is she dying?” he asked for all answer.

Mrs. Stringham waited—her face seemed to sound him. Then her own reply was strange. “She hasn’t so much as named you. We haven’t spoken.”

“Not for three days?”

“No more,” she simply went on, “than if it were all over. Not even by the faintest allusion.”

“Oh,” said Densher with more light, “you mean you haven’t spoken about *me?”*

“About what else? No more than if you were dead.”

“Well,” he answered after a moment, “I *am* dead.”

“Then I am,” said Susan Shepherd with a drop of her arms on her waterproof.

It was a tone that, for the minute, imposed itself in its dry despair ; it represented, in the bleak place, which had no life of its own, none but the life Kate had left—the sense of which, for that matter, by mystic channels, might fairly be reaching the visitor—the very impotence of their extinction. And Densher had nothing to oppose it withal, nothing but again: “Is she dying?”

It made her, however, as if these were crudities, almost material pangs, only say as before: “Then you know?”

“Yes,” he at last returned, “I know. But the marvel to me is that you do. I’ve no right in fact to imagine or to assume that you do.”

“You may,” said Susan Shepherd, “all the same. I know.”

“Everything?”

Her eyes, through her veil, kept pressing him. “No—not everything. That’s why I’ve come.”

“That I shall really tell you?” With which, as she hesitated and it affected him, he brought out in a groan a doubting “Oh, oh!” It turned him from her to the place itself, which was a part of what was in him, was the abode, the worn shrine more than ever, of the fact in possession, the fact, now a thick association, for which he had hired it. *That* was not for telling, but Susan Shepherd was, none the less, so decidedly wonderful that the sense of it might really have begun, by an effect already operating, to be a part of her knowledge. He saw, and it stirred him, that she hadn’t come to judge him; had come rather, so far as she might dare, to pity. This showed him her own abasement—that, at any rate, of grief; and made him feel with a rush of friendliness that he liked to be with her. The rush had quickened when she met his groan with an attenuation.

“We shall at all events—if that’s anything—be together.”

It was his own good impulse in herself. “It’s what I’ve ventured to feel. It’s much.” She replied in effect, silently, that it was whatever he liked; on which, so far as he had been afraid for anything, he knew his fear had dropped. The comfort was huge, for it gave back to him something precious, over which, in the effort of

recovery, his own hand had too imperfectly closed. Kate, he remembered, had said to him, with her sole and single boldness—and also on grounds he hadn't then measured—that Mrs. Stringham was a person who *wouldn't,* at a pinch, in a stretch of confidence, wince. It was but another of the cases in which Kate was always showing. "You don't think then very horridly of me?"

And her answer was the more valuable that it came without nervous effusion—quite as if she understood what he might conceivably have believed. She turned over in fact what she thought, and that was what helped him. "Oh you've been extraordinary!"

It made him aware the next moment of how they had been planted there. She took off her cloak with his aid, though when she had also, accepting a seat, removed her veil, he recognized in her personal ravage that the words she had just uttered to him were the one flower she had to throw. They were all her consolation for him, and the consolation even still depended on the event. She sat with him at any rate in the grey clearance, as sad as a winter dawn, made by their meeting. The image she again evoked for him loomed in it but the larger. "She has turned her face to the wall."

He saw with the last vividness, and it was as if, in their silences, they were simply so leaving what he saw. "She doesn't speak at all? I don't mean not of me."

"Of nothing—of no one." And she went on, Susan Shepherd, giving it out as she had had to take it. "She doesn't *want* to die. Think of her age. Think of her goodness. Think of her beauty. Think of all she is. Think of all she *has.* She lies there stiffening herself and clinging to it all. So I thank God—!" the poor lady wound up with a wan inconsequence.

He wondered. "You thank God—?"

"That she's so quiet."

He continued to wonder. *"Is* she so quiet?"

"She's more than quiet. She's grim. It's what she has never been. So you see—all these days. I can't tell you—but it's better so. It would kill me if she were to tell me."

"To tell you?" He was still at a loss.

"How she feels. How she clings. How she doesn't want it."

"How she doesn't want to die? Of course she doesn't want it." He had a long pause, and they might have been thinking together of what they could even now do to prevent it. This, however, was not what he brought out. Milly's "grimness" and the great hushed palace were present to him; present with the little woman before him as she must have been waiting there and listening. "Only, what harm have *you* done her?"

Mrs. Stringham looked about in her darkness. "I don't know. I come and talk of her here with you."

It made him again hesitate. "Does she utterly hate me?"

"I don't know. How *can* I? No one ever will."

"She'll never tell?"

"She'll never tell."

Once more he thought. "She must be magnificent."

"She is magnificent."

His friend, after all, helped him, and he turned it, so far as he could, all over. "Would she see me again?"

It made his companion stare. "Should you like to see her?"

"You mean as you describe her?" He felt her surprise, and it took him some time. "No."

"Ah then!" Mrs. Stringham sighed.

"But if she could bear it I'd do anything."

She had for the moment her vision of this, but it collapsed. "I don't see what you can do."

"I don't either. But *she* might."

Mrs. Stringham continued to think. "It's too late."

"Too late for her to see—?"

"Too late."

The very decision of her despair—it was after all so lucid—kindled in him a heat. “But the doctor, all the while—?”

“Tacchini? Oh he’s kind. He comes. He’s proud of having been approved and coached by a great London man. He hardly in fact goes away; so that I scarce know what becomes of his other patients. He thinks her, justly enough, a great personage; he treats her like royalty; he’s waiting on events. But she has barely consented to see him, and, though she has told him, generously—for she *thinks* of me, dear creature—that he may come, that he may stay, for my sake, he spends most of his time only hovering at her door, prowling through the rooms, trying to entertain me, in that ghastly saloon, with the gossip of Venice, and meeting me, in doorways, in the sala, on the staircase, with an agreeable intolerable smile. We don’t,” said Susan Shepherd, “talk of her.”

“By her request?”

“Absolutely. I don’t do what she doesn’t wish. We talk of the price of provisions.”

“By her request too?”

“Absolutely. She named it to me as a subject when she said, the first time, that if it would be any comfort to me he might stay as much as we liked.”

Densher took it all in. “But he isn’t any comfort to you!”

“None whatever. That, however,” she added, “isn’t his fault. Nothing’s any comfort.”

“Certainly,” Densher observed, “as I but too horribly feel, *I’m* not.”

“No. But I didn’t come for that.”

“You came for *me.”*

“Well then call it that.” But she looked at him a moment with eyes filled full, and something came up in her the next instant from deeper still. “I came at bottom of course—”

“You came at bottom of course for our friend herself. But if it’s, as you say, too late for me to do anything?”

She continued to look at him, and with an irritation, which he saw grow in her, from the truth itself. “So I did say. But, with you here”—and she turned her vision again strangely about her—“with you here, and with everything, I feel we mustn’t abandon her.”

“God forbid we should abandon her.”

“Then you *won’t?”* His tone had made her flush again.

“How do you mean I ‘won’t,’ if she abandons *me?* What can I do if she won’t see me?”

“But you said just now you wouldn’t like it.”

“I said I shouldn’t like it in the light of what you tell me. I shouldn’t like it only to see her as you make me. I should like it if I could help her. But even then,” Densher pursued without faith, “she would have to want it first herself. And there,” he continued to make out, “is the devil of it. She *won’t* want it herself. She *can’t!”*

He had got up in his impatience of it, and she watched him while he helplessly moved. “There’s one thing you can do. There’s only that, and even for that there are difficulties. But there is that.” He stood before her with his hands in his pockets, and he had soon enough, from her eyes, seen what was coming. She paused as if waiting for his leave to utter it, and as he only let her wait they heard in the silence, on the Canal, the renewed downpour of rain. She had at last to speak, but, as if still with her fear, she only half-spoke. “I think you really know yourself what it is.”

He did know what it was, and with it even, as she said—rather!—there were difficulties. He turned away on them, on everything, for a moment; he moved to the other window and looked at the sheeted channel, wider, like a river, where the houses opposite, blurred and belittled, stood at twice their distance. Mrs. Stringham said nothing, was as mute in fact, for the minute, as if she had “had” him, and he was the first again to speak. When he did so, however, it was not in straight answer to her last remark—he only started from that. He said, as he came back to her, “Let me, you know, *see—one* must understand,” almost as if he had for the time accepted it. And what he wished to understand was where, on the essence of the question, was the voice of Sir Luke Strett. If they talked of not giving her up shouldn’t *he* be the one least of all to do it? “Aren’t we, at the worst, in the dark without him?”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Stringham, “it’s he who has kept me going. I wired the first night, and he answered like an angel. He’ll come like one. Only he can’t arrive, at the nearest, till Thursday afternoon.”

“Well then that’s something.”

She considered. “Something—yes. She likes him.”

“Rather! I can see it still, the face with which, when he was here in October—that night when she was in white, when she had people there and those musicians—she committed him to my care. It was beautiful for both of us—she put us in relation. She asked me, for the time, to take him about; I did so, and we quite hit it off. That proved,” Densher said with a quick sad smile, “that she liked him.”

“He liked *you,”* Susan Shepherd presently risked.

“Ah I know nothing about that.”

“You ought to then. He went with you to galleries and churches; you saved his time for him, showed him the choicest things, and you perhaps will remember telling me myself that if he hadn’t been a great surgeon he might really have been a great judge. I mean of the beautiful.”

“Well,” the young man admitted, “that’s what he is—in having judged her. He hasn’t,” he went on, “judged her for nothing. His interest in her—which we must make the most of—can only be supremely beneficent.”

He still roamed, while he spoke, with his hands in his pockets, and she saw him, on this, as her eyes sufficiently betrayed, trying to keep his distance from the recognition he had a few moments before partly confessed to. “I’m glad,” she dropped, “you like him!”

There was something for him in the sound of it. “Well, I do no more, dear lady, than you do yourself. Surely you like him. Surely, when he was here, we all liked him.”

“Yes, but I seem to feel I know what he thinks. And I should think, with all the time you spent with him, you’d know it,” she said, “yourself.”

Densher stopped short, though at first without a word. “We never spoke of her. Neither of us mentioned her, even to sound her name, and nothing whatever in connexion with her passed between us.”

Mrs. Stringham stared up at him, surprised at this picture. But she had plainly an idea that after an instant resisted it. “That was his professional propriety.”

“Precisely. But it was also my sense of that virtue in him, and it was something more besides.” And he spoke with sudden intensity. “I couldn’t *talk* to him about her!”

“Oh!” said Susan Shepherd.

“I can’t talk to any one about her.”

“Except to *me,*” his friend continued.

“Except to you.” The ghost of her smile, a gleam of significance, had waited on her words, and it kept him, for honesty, looking at her. For honesty too—that is for his own words—he had quickly coloured: he was sinking so, at a stroke, the burden of his discourse with Kate. His visitor, for the minute, while their eyes met, might have been watching him hold it down. And he *had* to hold it down—the effort of which, precisely, made him red. He couldn’t let it come up; at least not yet. She might make what she would of it. He attempted to repeat his statement, but he really modified it. “Sir Luke, at all events, had nothing to tell me, and I had nothing to tell him. Make-believe talk was impossible for us, and—”

“And *real”*—she had taken him right up with a huge emphasis—“ was more impossible still.” No doubt—he didn’t deny it; and she had straightway drawn her conclusion. “Then that proves what I say—that there were immensities between you. Otherwise you’d have chattered.”

“I dare say,” Densher granted, “we were both thinking of her.”

“You were neither of you thinking of any one else. That’s why you kept together.”

Well, that too, if she desired, he took from her; but he came straight back to what he had originally said. “I haven’t a notion, all the same, of what he thinks.” She faced him, visibly, with the question into which he had already observed that her special shade of earnestness was perpetually flowering, right and left—“Are you very sure?”—and he could only note her apparent difference from himself. “You, I judge, believe that he thinks she’s gone.”

She took it, but she bore up. “It doesn’t matter what I believe.”

“Well, we shall see”—and he felt almost basely superficial. More and more, for the last five minutes, had he known she had brought something with her, and never in respect to anything had he had such a wish to postpone. He would have liked to put everything off till Thursday; he was sorry it was now Tuesday; he

wondered if he were afraid. Yet it wasn't of Sir Luke, who was coming; nor of Milly, who was dying; nor of Mrs. Stringham, who was sitting there. It wasn't, strange to say, of Kate either, for Kate's presence affected him suddenly as having swooned or trembled away. Susan Shepherd's, thus prolonged, had cast on it some influence under which it had ceased to act. She was as absent to his sensibility as she had constantly been, since her departure, absent, as an echo or a reference, from the palace; and it was the first time, among the objects now surrounding him, that his sensibility so noted her. He knew soon enough that it was of himself he was afraid, and that even, if he didn't take care, he should infallibly be more so. "Meanwhile," he added for his companion, "it has been everything for me to see you."

She slowly rose at the words, which might almost have conveyed to her the hint of his taking care. She stood there as if she had in fact seen him abruptly moved to dismiss her. But the abruptness would have been in this case so marked as fairly to offer ground for insistence to her imagination of his state. It would take her moreover, she clearly showed him she was thinking, but a minute or two to insist. Besides, she had already said it. "Will you do it if *he* asks you? I mean if Sir Luke himself puts it to you. And will you give him"—oh she was earnest now!—"the opportunity to put it to you?"

"The opportunity to put what?"

"That if you deny it to her, that may still do something."

Densher felt himself—as had already once befallen him in the quarter of an hour—turn red to the top of his forehead. Turning red had, however, for him, a sign of shame, been, so to speak, discounted: his consciousness of it at the present moment was rather as a sign of his fear. It showed him sharply enough of what he was afraid. "If I deny what to her?"

Hesitation, on the demand, revived in her, for hadn't he all along been letting her see that he knew? "Why, what Lord Mark told her."

"And what did Lord Mark tell her?"

Mrs. Stringham had a look of bewilderment—of seeing him as suddenly perverse. "I've been judging that you yourself know." And it was she who now blushed deep.

It quickened his pity for her, but he was beset too by other things. "Then *you* know—"

"Of his dreadful visit?" She stared. "Why it's what has done it."

"Yes—I understand that. But you also know—"

He had faltered again, but all she knew she now wanted to say. "I'm speaking," she said soothingly, "of what he told her. It's *that* that I've taken you as knowing."

"Oh!" he sounded in spite of himself.

It appeared to have for her, he saw the next moment, the quality of relief, as if he had supposed her thinking of something else. Thereupon, straightway, that lightened it. "Oh you thought I've known it for *true!"*

Her light had heightened her flush, and he saw that he had betrayed himself. Not, however, that it mattered, as he immediately saw still better. There it was now, all of it at last, and this at least there was no postponing. They were left with her idea—the one she was wishing to make him recognize. He had expressed ten minutes before his need to understand, and she was acting after all but on that. Only what he was to understand was no small matter; it might be larger even than as yet appeared.

He took again one of his turns, not meeting what she had last said; he mooned a minute, as he would have called it, at a window; and of course she could see that she had driven him to the wall. She did clearly, without delay, see it; on which her sense of having "caught" him became as promptly a scruple, which she spoke as if not to press. "What I mean is that he told her you've been all the while engaged to Miss Croy."

He gave a jerk round; it was almost—to hear it—the touch of a lash; and he said—idiotically, as he afterwards knew—the first thing that came into his head. "All what while?"

"Oh it's not I who say it." She spoke in gentleness. "I only repeat to you what he told her."

Densher, from whom an impatience had escaped, had already caught himself up. "Pardon my brutality. Of course I know what you're talking about. I saw him, toward the evening," he further explained, "in the Piazza; only just saw him—through the glass at Florian's—without any words. In fact I scarcely know him—there wouldn't have been occasion. It was but once, moreover—he must have gone that night. But I knew he wouldn't have come for nothing, and I turned it over—what he would have come for."

Oh so had Mrs. Stringham. "He came for exasperation."

Densher approved. “He came to let her know that he knows better than she for whom it was she had a couple of months before, in her fool’s paradise, refused him.”

“How you *do* know!”—and Mrs. Stringham almost smiled.

“I know that—but I don’t know the good it does him.”

“The good, he thinks, if he has patience—not too much—may be to come. He doesn’t know what he has done to her. Only *we,* you see, do that.”

He saw, but he wondered. “She kept from him—what she felt?”

“She was able—I’m sure of it—not to show anything. He dealt her his blow, and she took it without a sign.” Mrs. Stringham, it was plain, spoke by book, and it brought into play again her appreciation of what she related. “She’s magnificent.”

Densher again gravely assented. “Magnificent!”

“And *he,”* she went on, “is an idiot of idiots.”

“An idiot of idiots.” For a moment, on it all, on the stupid doom in it, they looked at each other. “Yet he’s thought so awfully clever.”

“So awfully—it’s Maud Lowder’s own view. And he was nice, in London,” said Mrs. Stringham, “to me. One could almost pity him—he has had such a good conscience.”

“That’s exactly the inevitable ass.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t—I could see from the only few things she first told me—that he meant her the least harm. He intended none whatever.”

“That’s always the ass at his worst,” Densher returned. “He only of course meant harm to me.”

“And good to himself—he thought that would come. He had been unable to swallow,” Mrs. Stringham pursued, “what had happened on his other visit. He had been then too sharply humiliated.”

“Oh I saw that.”

“Yes, and he also saw you. He saw you received, as it were, while he was turned away.”

“Perfectly,” Densher said—“I’ve filled it out. And also that he has known meanwhile for *what* I was then received. For a stay of all these weeks. He had had it to think of.”

“Precisely—it was more than he could bear. But he has it,” said Mrs. Stringham, “to think of still.”

“Only, after all,” asked Densher, who himself somehow, at this point, was having more to think of even than he had yet had—“only, after all, how has he happened to know? That is, to know enough.”

“What do you call enough?” Mrs. Stringham inquired.

“He can only have acted—it would have been his sole safety—from full knowledge.”

He had gone on without heeding her question; but, face to face as they were, something had none the less passed between them. It was this that, after an instant, made her again interrogative. “What do you mean by full knowledge?”

Densher met it indirectly. “Where has he been since October?”

“I think he has been back to England. He came in fact, I’ve reason to believe, straight from there.”

“Straight to do this job? All the way for his half-hour?”

“Well, to try again—with the help perhaps of a new fact. To make himself possibly right with her—a different attempt from the other. He had at any rate something to tell her, and he didn’t know his opportunity would reduce itself to half an hour. Or perhaps indeed half an hour would be just what was most effective. It *has* been!” said Susan Shepherd.

Her companion took it in, understanding but too well; yet as she lighted the matter for him more, really, than his own courage had quite dared—putting the absent dots on several i’s—he saw new questions swarm. They had been till now in a bunch, entangled and confused; and they fell apart, each showing for itself. The first he put to her was at any rate abrupt. “Have you heard of late from Mrs. Lowder.”

“Oh yes, two or three times. She depends naturally upon news of Milly.”

He hesitated. “And does she depend, naturally, upon news of *me?”*

His friend matched for an instant his deliberation.

“I’ve given her none that hasn’t been decently good. This will

have been the first.”

“ ‘This’?” Densher was thinking.

“Lord Mark’s having been here, and her being as she is.”

He thought a moment longer. “What has Mrs. Lowder written about him? Has she written that he has been with them?”

“She has mentioned him but once—it was in her letter before the last. Then she said something.”

“And what did she say?”

Mrs. Stringham produced it with an effort. “Well it was in reference to Miss Croy. That she thought Kate was thinking of him. Or perhaps I should say rather that he was thinking of *her*—only it seemed this time to have struck Maud that he was seeing the way more open to him.”

Densher listened with his eyes on the ground, but he presently raised them to speak, and there was that in his face which proved him aware of a queerness in his question. “Does she mean he has been encouraged to *propose* to her niece?”

“I don’t know what she means.”

“Of course not”—he recovered himself; “and I oughtn’t to seem to trouble you to piece together what I can’t piece myself. Only I ‘guess,”’ he added, “I can piece it.”

She spoke a little timidly, but she risked it. “I dare say I can piece it too.”

It was one of the things in her—and his conscious face took it from her as such—that from the moment of her coming in had seemed to mark for him, as to what concerned him, the long jump of her perception. They had parted four days earlier with many things, between them, deep down. But these things were now on their troubled surface, and it wasn’t he who had brought them so quickly up. Women were wonderful—at least this one was. But so, not less, was Milly, was Aunt Maud; so, most of all, was his very Kate. Well, he already knew what he had been feeling about the circle of petticoats. They were all such petticoats! It was just the fineness of his tangle. The sense of that, in its turn, for us too, might have been not unconnected with his putting to his visitor a question that quite passed over her remark. “Has Miss Croy meanwhile written to our friend?”

“Oh,” Mrs. Stringham amended, *“her* friend also. But not a single word that I know of.”

He had taken it for certain she hadn’t—the thing being after all but a shade more strange than his having himself, with Milly, never for six weeks mentioned the young lady in question. It was for that matter but a shade more strange than Milly’s not having mentioned her. In spite of which, and however inconsequently, he blushed anew for Kate’s silence. He got away from it in fact as quickly as possible, and the furthest he could get was by reverting for a minute to the man they had been judging. “How did he manage to get *at* her? She had only—with what had passed between them before—to say she couldn’t see him.”

“Oh she was disposed to kindness. She was easier,” the good lady explained with a slight embarrassment, “than at the other time.”

“Easier?”

“She was off her guard. There was a difference.”

“Yes. But exactly not *the* difference.”

“Exactly not the difference of her having to be harsh. Perfectly. She could afford to be the opposite.” With which, as he said nothing, she just impatiently completed her sense. “She had had *you* here for six weeks.”

“Oh!” Densher softly groaned.

“Besides, I think he must have written her first—written I mean in a tone to smooth his way. That it would be a kindness to himself. Then on the spot—”

“On the spot,” Densher broke in, “he unmasked? The horrid little beast!”

It made Susan Shepherd turn slightly pale, though quickening, as for hope, the intensity of her look at him. “Oh he went off without an alarm.”

“And he must have gone off also without a hope.”

“Ah that, certainly.”

“Then it was mere base revenge. Hasn’t he known her, into the bargain,” the young man asked—“didn’t he, weeks before, see her, judge her, feel her, as having for such a suit as his not more perhaps than a few months to live?”

Mrs. Stringham at first, for reply, but looked at him in silence; and it gave more force to what she then remarkably added. “He has doubtless been aware of what you speak of, just as you have yourself been aware.”

“He has wanted her, you mean, just *because*—?”

“Just because,” said Susan Shepherd.

“The hound!” Merton Densher brought out. He moved off, however, with a hot face, as soon as he had spoken, conscious again of an intention in his visitor’s reserve. Dusk was now deeper, and after he had once more taken counsel of the dreariness without he turned to his companion. “Shall we have lights—a lamp or the candles?”

“Not for me.”

“Nothing?”

“Not for me.”

He waited at the window another moment and then faced his friend with a thought. “He *will* have proposed to Miss Croy. That’s what has happened.”

Her reserve continued, “It’s you who must judge.”

“Well, I do judge. Mrs. Lowder will have done so too—only *she,* poor lady, wrong. Miss Croy’s refusal of him will have struck him”—Densher continued to make it out—“as a phenomenon requiring a reason.”

“And you’ve been clear to him *as* the reason?”

“Not too clear—since I’m sticking here and since that has been a fact to make his descent on Miss Theale relevant. But clear enough. He has believed,” said Densher bravely, “that I may have been a reason at Lancaster Gate, and yet at the same time have been up to something in Venice.”

Mrs. Stringham took her courage from his own. “ ‘Up to’ something? Up to what?”

“God knows. To some ‘game,’ as they say. To some deviltry. To some duplicity.”

“Which of course,” Mrs. Stringham observed, “is a monstrous supposition.” Her companion, after a stiff minute—sensibly long for each—fell away from her again, and then added to it another minute, which he spent once more looking out with his hands in his pockets. This was no answer, he perfectly knew, to what she had dropped, and it even seemed to state for his own ears that no answer was possible. She left him to himself, and he was glad she had declined, for their further colloquy, the advantage of lights. These would have been an advantage mainly to herself. Yet she got her benefit too even from the absence of them. It came out in her very tone when at last she addressed him—so differently, for confidence—in words she had already used. “If Sir Luke himself asks it of you as something you can do for *him,* will you deny to Milly herself what she has been so dreadfully to believe?”

Oh how he knew he hung back! But at last he said: “You’re absolutely certain then that she does believe it?”

“Certain?” She appealed to their whole situation. “Judge!”

He took his time again to judge. “Do *you* believe it?”

He was conscious that his own appeal pressed her hard; it eased him a little that her answer must be a pain to her discretion. She answered none the less, and he was truly the harder pressed. “What I believe will inevitably depend more or less on your action. You can perfectly settle it—if you care. I promise to believe you down to the ground if, to save her life, you consent to a denial.”

“But a denial, when it comes to that—confound the whole thing, don’t you see!—of exactly what?”

It was as if he were hoping she would narrow; but in fact she enlarged. “Of everything.”

Everything had never even yet seemed to him so incalculably much. “Oh!” he simply moaned into the gloom.[25]

—IV—

The near Thursday, coming nearer and bringing Sir Luke Strett, brought also blessedly an abatement of other rigors. The weather changed, the stubborn storm yielded, and the autumn sunshine, baffled for many days, but now hot and almost vindictive, came into its own again and, with an almost audible paean, a suffusion of bright sound that was one with the bright colour, took large possession. Venice glowed and splashed and called and chimed again; the air was like a clap of hands, and the scattered pinks, yellows, blues, sea-greens, were like a hanging-out of vivid stuffs, a laying-down of fine carpets. Densher rejoiced in this on the occasion of his going to the station to meet the great doctor. He went after consideration, which, as he was constantly aware, was at present his imposed, his only, way of doing anything. That was where the event had landed him —where no event in his life had landed him before. He had thought, no doubt, from the day he was born, much more than he had acted; except indeed that he remembered thoughts—a few of them—which at the moment of their coming to him had thrilled him almost like adventures. But anything like his actual state he had not, as to the prohibition of impulse, accident, range—the prohibition in other words of freedom—hitherto known. The great oddity was that if he had felt his arrival, so few weeks back, especially as an adventure, nothing could now less resemble one than the fact of his staying. It would be an adventure to break away, to depart, to go back, above all, to London, and tell Kate Croy he had done so; but there was something of the merely, the almost meanly, obliged and involved sort in his going on as he was. That was the effect in particular of Mrs. Stringham's visit, which had left him as with such a taste in his mouth of what he couldn't do. It had made this quantity clear to him, and yet had deprived him of the sense, the other sense, of what, for a refuge, he possibly *could*.

It was but a small make-believe of freedom, he knew, to go to the station for Sir Luke. Nothing equally free, at all events, had he yet turned over so long. What then was his odious position but that again and again he was afraid? He stiffened himself under this consciousness as if it had been a tax levied by a tyrant. He hadn't at any time proposed to himself to live long enough for fear to preponderate in his life. Such was simply the advantage it had actually got of him. He was afraid for instance that an advance to his distinguished friend might prove for him somehow a pledge or a committal. He was afraid of it as a current that would draw him too far; yet he thought with an equal aversion of being shabby, being poor, through fear. What finally prevailed with him was the reflexion that, whatever might happen, the great man had, after that occasion at the palace, their young woman's brief sacrifice to society—and the hour of Mrs. Stringham's appeal had brought it well to the surface—shown him marked benevolence. Mrs. Stringham's comments on the relation in which Milly had placed them made him—it was unmistakable—feel things he perhaps hadn't felt. It was in the spirit of seeking a chance to feel again adequately whatever it was he had missed—it was, no doubt, in that spirit, so far as it went a stroke for freedom, that Densher, arriving betimes, paced the platform before the train came in. Only, after it had come and he had presented himself at the door of Sir Luke's compartment with everything that followed—only, as the situation developed, the sense of an anti-climax to so many intensities deprived his apprehensions and hesitations even of the scant dignity they might claim. He could scarce have said if the visitor's manner less showed the remembrance that might have suggested expectation, or made shorter work of surprise in presence of the fact.

Sir Luke had clean forgotten—so Densher read—the rather remarkable young man he had formerly gone about with, though he picked him up again, on the spot, with one large quiet look. The young man felt himself so picked, and the thing immediately affected him as the proof of a splendid economy. Opposed to all the waste with which he was now connected the exhibition was of a nature quite nobly to admonish him. The eminent pilgrim, in the train, all the way, had used the hours as he needed, thinking not a moment in advance of what finally awaited him. An exquisite case awaited him—of which, in this queer way, the remarkable young man was an outlying part; but the single motion of his face, the motion into which Densher, from the platform, lightly stirred its stillness, was his first renewed cognition. If, however, he had suppressed the matter by leaving Victoria he would at once suppress now, in turn, whatever else suited. The perception of this became as a symbol of the whole pitch, so far as one might one's self be concerned, of his visit. One saw, our friend further meditated, everything that, in contact, he appeared to accept—if only, for much, not to trouble to sink it: what one missed was the inward use he made of it. Densher began wondering, at the great water-steps outside, what use he would make of the anomaly of their having there to separate. Eugenio had been on the platform, in the respectful rear, and the gondola from the palace, under his direction, bestirred itself, with its attaching mixture of alacrity and dignity, on their coming out of the station together. Densher didn't at all mind now that, he himself of necessity refusing a seat on the deep black cushions beside the guest of the palace, he had Milly's three emissaries for spectators; and this susceptibility, he also knew, it was something to have left behind. All he did was to smile down vaguely from the steps—they could see him, the donkeys, as shut out as they would. "I don't," he said with a sad headshake, "go there now."

"Oh!" Sir Luke Strett returned, and made no more of it; so that the thing was splendid, Densher fairly thought, as an inscrutability quite inevitable and unconscious. His friend appeared not even to make of it that

he supposed it might be for respect to the crisis. He didn't moreover afterwards make much more of anything —after the classic craft, that is, obeying in the main Pasquale's inimitable stroke from the poop, had performed the maneuver by which it presented, receding, a back, so to speak, rendered positively graceful by the high black hump of its felze.[bg] Densher watched the gondola out of sight—he heard Pasquale's cry, borne to him across the water, for the sharp firm swerve into a side-canal, a short cut to the palace. he had no gondola of his own; it was his habit never to take one; and he humbly—as in Venice it is humble—walked away, though not without having for some time longer stood as if fixed where the guest of the palace had left him. It was strange enough, but he found himself as never yet, and as he couldn't have reckoned, in presence of the truth that was the truest about Milly. He couldn't have reckoned on the force of the difference instantly made—for it was all in the air as he heard Pasquale's cry and saw the boat disappear—by the mere visibility, on the spot, of the personage summoned to her aid. He hadn't only never been near the facts of her condition —which counted so as a blessing for him; he hadn't only, with all the world, hovered outside an impenetrable ring fence, within which there reigned a kind of expensive vagueness made up of smiles and silences and beautiful fictions and priceless arrangements, all strained to breaking ; but he had also, with every one else, as he now felt, actively fostered suppressions which were in the direct interest of every one's good manner, every one's pity, every one's really quite generous ideal. It was a conspiracy of silence, as the *cliché* went, to which no one had made an exception, the great smudge of mortality across the picture, the shadow of pain and horror, finding in no quarter a surface of spirit or of speech that consented to reflect it. "The mere aesthetic instinct of mankind—!" our young man had more than once, in the connexion, said to himself; letting the rest of the proposition drop, but touching again thus sufficiently on the outrage even to taste involved in one's having to see. So then it had been—a general conscious fool's paradise, from which the specified had been chased like a dangerous animal. What therefore had at present befallen was that the specified, standing all the while at the gate, had now crossed the threshold as in Sir Luke Strett's person and quite on such a scale as to fill out the whole precinct. Densher's nerves, absolutely his heart-beats too, had measured the change before he on this occasion moved away.

The facts of physical suffering, of incurable pain, of the chance grimly. narrowed, had been made, at a stroke, intense, and this was to be the way he was now to feel them. The clearance of the air, in short, making vision not only possible but inevitable, the one thing left to be thankful for was the breadth of Sir Luke's shoulders, which, should one be able to keep in line with them, might in some degree interpose. It was, however, far from plain to Densher for the first day or two that he was again to see his distinguished friend at all. That he couldn't, on any basis actually serving, return to the palace—this was as solid to him, every whit, as the other feature of his case, the fact of the publicity attaching to his proscription through his not having taken himself off. He had been seen often enough in the Leporelli gondola. As, accordingly, he was not on any presumption destined to meet Sir Luke about the town, where the latter would have neither time nor taste to lounge, nothing more would occur between them unless the great man should surprisingly wait upon him. His doing that, Densher further reflected, wouldn't even simply depend on Mrs. Stringham's having decided to—as they might say—turn him on. It would depend as well—for there would be practically some difference to her —on her actually attempting it; and it would depend above all on what Sir Luke would make of such an overture. Densher had for that matter his own view of the amount, to say nothing of the particular sort, of response it might expect from him. He had his own view of the ability of such a personage even to understand such an appeal. To what extent could he be prepared, and what importance in fine could he attach? Densher asked himself these questions, in truth, to put his own position at the worst. He should miss the great man completely unless the great man should come to see him, and the great man could only come to see him for a purpose unsupposable. Therefore he wouldn't come at all, and consequently there was nothing to hope.

It wasn't in the least that Densher invoked this violence to all probability; but it pressed on him that there were few possible diversions he could afford now to miss. Nothing in his predicament was so odd as that, incontestably afraid of himself, he was not afraid of Sir Luke. He had an impression, which he clung to, based on a previous taste of the visitor's company, that he would somehow let him off. The truth about Milly perched on his shoulders and sounded in his tread, became by the fact of his presence the name and the form, for the time, of everything in the place; but it didn't, for the difference, sit in his face, the face so squarely and easily turned to Densher at the earlier season. His presence on the first occasion, not as the result of a summons, but as a friendly whim of his own, had had quite another value; and though our young man could scarce regard that value as recoverable he yet reached out in imagination to a renewal of the old contact. He didn't propose, as he privately and forcibly phrased the matter, to be a hog; but there was something he after all did want for himself. It was something—this stuck to him—that Sir Luke would have had for him if it hadn't been impossible. These were his worst days, the two or three; those on which even the sense of the tension at the palace didn't much help him not to feel that his destiny made but light of him. He had never been, as he judged it, so down. In mean conditions, without books, without society, almost without money, he had nothing to do but to wait. His main support really was his original idea, which didn't leave him, of waiting for the deepest depth his predicament could sink him to. Fate would invent, if he but gave it time, some refinement of the horrible. It was just inventing meanwhile this suppression of Sir Luke. When the third

day came without a sign he knew what to think. He had given Mrs. Stringham during her call on him no such answer as would have armed her faith, and the ultimatum she had described as ready for him when *he* should be ready was therefore—if on no other ground than her want of this power to answer for him—not to be presented. The presentation, heaven knew, was not what he desired.

That was not, either, we hasten to declare—as Densher then soon enough saw—the idea with which Sir Luke finally stood before him again. For stand before him again he finally did; just when our friend had gloomily embraced the belief that the limit of his power to absent himself from London obligations would have been reached. Four or five days, exclusive of journeys, represented the largest supposable sacrifice—to a head not crowned—on the part of one of the highest medical lights in the world; so that really when the personage in question, following up a tinkle of the bell, solidly rose in the doorway, it was to impose on Densher a vision that for the instant cut like a knife. It spoke, in fact, and in a single dreadful word, of the magnitude—he shrank from calling it anything else—of Milly's case. The great man had not gone then, and an immense surrender to her immense need was so expressed in it that some effect, some help, some hope, were flagrantly part of the expression. It was for Densher, with his reaction from disappointment, as if he were conscious of ten things at once—the foremost being that just conceivably, since Sir Luke was still there, she had been saved. Close upon its heels, however, and quite as sharply, came the sense that the crisis—plainly even now to be prolonged for him—was to have none of that sound simplicity. Not only had his visitor not dropped in to gossip about Milly, he hadn't dropped in to mention her at all; he had dropped in fairly to show that during the brief remainder of his stay, the end of which was now in sight, as little as possible of that was to be looked for. The demonstration, such as it was, was in the key of their previous acquaintance, and it was their previous acquaintance that had made him come. He was not to stop longer than the Saturday next at hand, but there were things of interest he should like to see again meanwhile. It was for these things of interest, for Venice and the opportunity of Venice, for a prowl or two, as he called it, and a turn about, that he had looked his young man up—producing on the latter's part, as soon as the case had, with the lapse of a further twenty-four hours, so defined itself, the most incongruous, yet most beneficent revulsion. Nothing could in fact have been more monstrous on the surface—and Densher was well aware of it—than the relief he found during this short period in the tacit drop of all reference to the palace, in neither hearing news nor asking for it. That was what had come out for him, on his visitor's entrance, even in the very seconds of suspense that were connecting the fact also directly and intensely with Milly's state. He had come to say he had saved her—he had come, as from Mrs. Stringham, to say how she might be saved—he had come, in spite of Mrs. Stringham, to say she was lost: the distinct throbs of hope, of fear, simultaneous for all their distinctness, merged their identity in a bound of the heart just as immediate and which remained after they had passed. It simply did wonders for him—this was the truth—that Sir Luke was, as he would have said, quiet.

The result of it was the oddest consciousness as of a blest calm after a storm. He had been trying for weeks, as we know, to keep superlatively still, and trying it largely in solitude and silence; but he looked back on it now as on the heart of fever. The real, the right stillness was this particular form of society. They walked together and they talked, looked up pictures again and recovered impressions—Sir Luke knew just what he wanted; haunted a little the dealers in old wares; sat down at Florian's for rest and mild drinks; blessed above all the grand weather, a bath of warm air, a pageant of autumn light. Once or twice while they rested the great man closed his eyes—keeping them so for some minutes while his companion, the more easily watching his face for it, made private reflexions on the subject of lost sleep. He had been up at night with her—he in person, for hours; but this was all he showed of it and was apparently to remain his nearest approach to an allusion. The extraordinary thing was that Densher could take it in perfectly as evidence, could turn cold at the image looking out of it; and yet that he could at the same time not intermit a throb of his response to accepted liberation. The liberation was an experience that held its own, and he continued to know why, in spite of his deserts, in spite of his folly, in spite of everything, he had so fondly hoped for it. He had hoped for it, had sat in his room there waiting for it, because he had thus divined in it, should it come, some power to let him off. He was *being* let off; dealt with in the only way that didn't aggravate his responsibility. The beauty was also that this wasn't on system or on any basis of intimate knowledge; it was just by being a man of the world and by knowing life, by feeling the real, that Sir Luke did him good. There had been in all the case too many women. A man's sense of it, another man's, changed the air; and he wondered what man, had he chosen, would have been more to his purpose than this one. He was large and easy—that was the benediction; he knew what mattered and what didn't, he distinguished between the essence and the shell, the just grounds and the unjust for fussing. One was thus—if one were concerned with him or exposed to him at all—in his hands for whatever he should do, and not much less affected by his mercy than one might have been by his rigor. The grand thing—it did come to that—was the way he carried off, as one might fairly call it, the business of making odd things natural. Nothing, if they hadn't taken it so, could have exceeded the unexplained oddity, between them, of Densher's now complete detachment from the poor ladies at the palace; nothing could have exceeded the no less marked anomaly of the great man's own abstentions of speech. He made, as he had done when they met at the station, nothing whatever of anything; and the effect of it,

Densher would have said, was a relation with him quite resembling that of doctor and patient. One took the cue from him as one might have taken a dose—except that the cue was pleasant in the taking.

That was why one could leave it to his tacit discretion, why for the three or four days Densher again and again did so leave it; merely wondering a little, at the most, on the eve of Saturday, the announced term of the episode. Waiting once more on this latter occasion, the Saturday morning, for Sir Luke's reappearance at the station, our friend had to recognize the drop of his own borrowed ease, the result, naturally enough, of the prospect of losing a support. The difficulty was that, on such lines as had served them, the support was Sir Luke's personal presence. Would he go without leaving some substitute for that?—and without breaking, either, his silence in respect to his errand? Densher was in still deeper ignorance than at the hour of his call, and what was truly prodigious at so supreme a moment was that—as had immediately to appear—no gleam of light on what he had been living with for a week found its way out of him. What he had been doing was proof of a huge interest as well as of a huge fee; yet when the Leporelli gondola again, and somewhat tardily, approached, his companion, watching from the watersteps, studied his fine closed face as much as ever in vain. It was like a lesson, from the highest authority, on the subject of the relevant, so that its blankness affected Densher of a sudden almost as a cruelty, feeling it quite awfully compatible, as he did, with Milly's having ceased to exist. And the suspense continued after they had passed together, as time was short, directly into the station, where Eugenio, in the field early, was mounting guard over the compartment he had secured. The strain, though probably lasting, at the carriage-door, but a couple of minutes, prolonged itself so for our poor gentleman's nerves that he involuntarily directed a long look at Eugenio, who met it, however, as only Eugenio could. Sir Luke's attention was given for the time to the right bestowal of his numerous effects, about which he was particular, and Densher fairly found himself, so far as silence could go, questioning the representative of the palace. It didn't humiliate him now; it didn't humiliate him even to feel that that personage exactly knew how little he satisfied him. Eugenio resembled to that extent Sir Luke—to the extent of the extraordinary things with which his facial habit was compatible. By the time, however, that Densher had taken from it all its possessor intended Sir Luke was free and with a hand out for farewell. He offered the hand at first without speech; only on meeting his eyes could our young man see that they had never yet so completely looked at him. It was never, with Sir Luke, that they looked harder at one time than at another; but they looked longer, and this, even a shade of it, might mean on his part everything. It meant, Densher for ten seconds believed, that Milly Theale was dead; so that the word at last spoken made him start.

"I shall come back."

"Then she's better?"

"I shall come back within the month," Sir Luke repeated without heeding the question. He had dropped Densher's hand, but he held him otherwise still. "I bring you a message from Miss Theale," he said as if they hadn't spoken of her. "I'm commissioned to ask you from her to go and see her."

Densher's rebound from his supposition had a violence that his stare betrayed. *"She* asks me?"

Sir Luke had got into the carriage, the door of which the guard had closed; but he spoke again as he stood at the window, bending a little but not leaning out. "She told me she'd like it, and I promised that, as I expected to find you here, I'd let you know."

Densher, on the platform, took it from him, but what he took brought the blood into his face quite as what he had had to take from Mrs. Stringham. And he was also bewildered. "Then she can receive—?"

"She can receive you."

"And you're coming back—?"

"Oh because I must. She's not to move. She's to stay. I come to her."

"I see, I see," said Densher, who indeed did see—saw the sense of his friend's words and saw beyond it as well. What Mrs. Stringham had announced, and what he had yet expected not to have to face, *had* then come. Sir Luke had kept it for the last, but there it was, and the colourless compact form it was now taking—the tone of one man of the world to another, who, after what had happened, would understand—was but the characteristic manner of his appeal. Densher was to understand remarkably much; and the great thing certainly was to show that he did. "I'm particularly obliged, I'll go to-day." He brought that out, but in his pause, while they continued to look at each other, the train had slowly creaked into motion. There was time but for one more word, and the young man chose it, out of twenty, with intense concentration. "Then she's better?"

Sir Luke's face was wonderful. "Yes, she's better." And he kept it at the window while the train receded, holding him with it still. It was to be his nearest approach to the utter reference they had hitherto so successfully avoided. If it stood for everything, never had a face had to stand for more. So Densher, held after the train had gone, sharply reflected; so he reflected, asking himself into what abyss it pushed him, even while

conscious of retreating under the maintained observation of Eugenio.

BOOK TENTH

—I—

Then it has been—what do you say? a whole fortnight?—without your making a sign?" Kate put that to him distinctly, in the December dusk of Lancaster Gate and on the matter of the time he had been back; but he saw with it straightway that she was as admirably true as ever to her instinct—which was a system as well—of not admitting the possibility between them of small resentments, of trifles to trip up their general trust. That by itself, the renewed beauty of it, would at this fresh sight of her have stirred him to his depths if something else, something no less vivid but quite separate, hadn't stirred him still more. It was in seeing her that he felt what their interruption had been, and that they met across it even as persons whose adventures, on either side, in time and space, of the nature of perils and exiles, had had a peculiar strangeness. He wondered if he were as different for her as she herself had immediately appeared: which was but his way indeed of taking in, with his thrill, that-even going by the mere first look—she had never been so handsome. That fact bloomed for him, in the firelight and lamplight that glowed their welcome through the London fog, as the flower of her difference; just as her difference itself—part of which was her striking him as older in a degree for which no mere couple of months could account—was the fruit of their intimate relation. If she was different it was because they had chosen together that she should be, and she might now, as a proof of their wisdom, their success, of the reality of what had happened—of what in fact, for the spirit of each, was still happening—been showing it to him for pride. His having returned and yet kept, for numbered days, so still, had been, he was quite aware, the first point he should have to tackle; with which consciousness indeed he had made a clean breast of it in finally addressing Mrs. Lowder a note that had led to his present visit. He had written to Aunt Maud as the finer way; and it would doubtless have been to be noted that he needed no effort not to write to Kate. Venice was three weeks behind him—he had come up slowly; but it was still as if even in London he must conform to her law. That was exactly how he was able, with his faith in her steadiness, to appeal to her feeling for the situation and explain his stretched delicacy. He had come to tell her everything, so far as occasion would serve them; and if nothing was more distinct than that his slow journey, his waits, his delay to reopen communication had kept pace with this resolve, so the inconsequence was doubtless at bottom but one of the elements of intensity. He was gathering everything up, everything he should tell her. That took time, and the proof was that, as he felt on the spot, he couldn't have brought it all with him before this afternoon. He *had* brought it, to the last syllable, and, out of the quantity it wouldn't be hard—as he in fact found—to produce, for Kate's understanding, his first reason.

"A fortnight, yes—it was a fortnight Friday; but I've only been keeping in, you see, with our wonderful system." He was so easily justified as that this of itself plainly enough prevented her saying she didn't see. Their wonderful system was accordingly still vivid for her; and such a gage of its equal vividness for himself was precisely what she must have asked. He hadn't even to dot his i's beyond the remark that on the very face of it, she would remember, their wonderful system attached no premium to rapidities of transition. "I couldn't quite—don't you know?—take my rebound with a rush; and I suppose I've been instinctively hanging off to minimise, for you as well as for myself, the appearances of rushing. There's a sort of fitness. But I knew you'd understand." It was presently as if she really understood so well that she almost appealed from his insistence—yet looking at him too, he was not unconscious, as if this mastery of fitnesses was a strong sign for her of what she had done to him. He might have struck her as expert for contingencies in the very degree of her having in Venice struck *him* as expert. He smiled over his plea for a renewal with stages and steps, a thing shaded, as they might say, and graduated; though—finely as she must respond—she met the smile but as she had met his entrance five minutes before. Her soft gravity at that moment—which was yet not solemnity, but the look of a consciousness charged with life to the brim and wishing not to overflow—had not qualified her welcome; what had done this being much more the presence in the room, for a couple of minutes, of the footman who had introduced him and who had been interrupted in preparing the tea-table.

Mrs. Lowder's reply to Densher's note had been to appoint the tea-hour, five o'clock on Sunday, for his seeing them. Kate had thereafter wired him, without a signature, "Come on Sunday *before* tea—about a quarter of an hour, which will help us"; and he had arrived therefore scrupulously at twenty minutes to five. Kate was alone in the room and hadn't delayed to tell him that Aunt Maud, as she had happily gathered, was to be, for the interval-not long but precious—engaged with an old servant, retired and pensioned, who had been paying her a visit and who was within the hour to depart again for the suburbs. They were to have the

scrap of time, after the withdrawal of the footman, to themselves, and there was a moment when, in spite of their wonderful system, in spite of the proscription of rushes and the propriety of shades, it proclaimed itself indeed precious. And all without prejudice—that was what kept it noble—to Kate's high sobriety and her beautiful self-command. If he had his discretion she had her perfect manner, which was *her* decorum. Mrs. Stringham, he had, to finish with the question of his delay, furthermore observed, Mrs. Stringham would have written to Mrs. Lowder of his having quitted the place; so that it wasn't as if he were hoping to cheat them. They'd know he was no longer there.

"Yes, we've known it."

"And you continue to hear?"

"From Mrs. Stringham? Certainly. By which I mean Aunt Maud does."

"Then you've recent news?"

Her face showed a wonder. "Up to within a day or two I believe. But haven't *you?"*

"No—I've heard nothing." And it was now that he felt how much he had to tell her. "I don't get letters. But I've been sure Mrs. Lowder does." With which he added: "Then of course you know." He waited as if she would show what she knew; but she only showed in silence the dawn of a surprise that she couldn't control. There was nothing but for him to ask what he wanted. "Is Miss Theale alive?"

Kate's look at this was large. "Don't you *know?"*

"How should I, my dear—in the absence of everything?" And he himself stared as for light. "She's dead?" Then as with her eyes on him she slowly shook her head he uttered a strange "Not yet?"

It came out in Kate's face that there were several questions on her lips, but the one she presently put was: "Is it very terrible?"

"The manner of her so consciously and helplessly dying?" He had to think a moment. "Well, yes—since you ask me: very terrible to *me*—so far as, before I came away, I had any sight of it. But I don't think," he went on, "that—though I'll try—I *can* quite tell you what it was, what it is, for me. That's why I probably just sounded to you," he explained, "as if I hoped it might be over."

She gave him her quietest attention, but he by this time saw that, so far as telling her all was concerned, she would be divided between the wish and the reluctance to hear it; between the curiosity that, not unnaturally, would consume her and the opposing scruple of a respect for misfortune. The more she studied him too—and he had never so felt her closely attached to his face—the more the choice of an attitude would become impossible to her. There would simply be a feeling uppermost, and the feeling wouldn't be eagerness. This perception grew in him fast, and he even, with his imagination, had for a moment the quick forecast of her possibly breaking out at him, should he go too far, with a wonderful : "What horrors are you telling me?" It would have the sound—wouldn't it be open to him fairly to bring that out himself? —of a repudiation, for pity and almost for shame, of everything that in Venice had passed between them. Not that she would confess to any return upon herself; not that she would let compunction or horror give her away; but it was in the air for him—yes—that she wouldn't want details, that she positively wouldn't take them, and that, if he would generously understand it from her, she would prefer to keep him down. Nothing, however, was more definite for him than that at the same time he must remain down but so far as it suited him. Something rose strong within him against his not being free with her. She had been free enough about it all, three months before, with *him.* That was what she was at present only in the sense of treating him handsomely. "I can believe," she said with a perfect consideration, "how dreadful for you much of it must have been."

He didn't however take this up; there were things about which he wished first to be clear. "There's no other possibility, by what you now know? I mean for her life." And he had just to insist—she would say as little as she could. "She is dying?"

"She's dying."

It was strange to him, in the matter of Milly, that Lancaster Gate could make him any surer; yet what in the world, in the matter of Milly, wasn't strange? Nothing was so much so as his own behaviour—his present as well as his past. He could but do as he must. "Has Sir Luke Strett," he asked, "gone back to her?"

"I believe he's there now."

"Then," said Densher, "it's the end."

She took it in silence for whatever he deemed it to be; but she spoke otherwise after a minute. "You won't know, unless you've perhaps seen him yourself, that Aunt Maud has been to him."

“Oh!” Densher exclaimed, with nothing to add to it.

“For real news,” Kate herself after an instant added.

“She hasn’t thought Mrs. Stringham’s real?”

“It’s perhaps only I who haven’t. It was on Aunt Maud’s trying again three days ago to see him that she heard at his house of his having gone. He had started I believe some days before.”

“And won’t then by this time be back?”

Kate shook her head. “She sent yesterday to know.”

“He won’t leave her then”—Densher had turned it over—“while she lives. He’ll stay to the end. He’s magnificent.”

“I think *she* is,” said Kate.

It had made them again look at each other long; and what it drew from him rather oddly was: “Oh you don’t know!”

“Well, she’s after all my friend.”

It was somehow, with her handsome demur, the answer he had least expected of her; and it fanned with its breath, for a brief instant, his old sense of her variety. “I see. You would have been sure of it. You *were* sure of it.”

“Of course I was sure of it.”

And a pause again, with this, fell upon them; which Densher, however, presently broke. “If you don’t think Mrs. Stringham’s news ‘real’ what do you think of Lord Mark’s?”

She didn’t think anything. “Lord Mark’s?”

“You haven’t seen him?”

“Not since he saw her.”

“You’ve known then of his seeing her?”

“Certainly. From Mrs. Stringham.”

“And have you known,” Densher went on, “the rest?”

Kate wondered. “What rest?”

“Why everything. It was his visit that she couldn’t stand—it was what then took place that simply killed her.”

“Oh!” Kate seriously breathed. But she had turned pale, and he saw that, whatever her degree of ignorance of these connexions, it wasn’t put on. “Mrs. Stringham hasn’t said *that.”*

He observed none the less that she didn’t ask what had then taken place; and he went on with his contribution to her knowledge. “The way it affected her was that it made her give up. She has given up beyond all power to care again, and that’s why she’s dying.”

“Oh!” Kate once more slowly sighed, but with a vagueness that made him pursue.

“One can see now that she was living by will—which was very much what you originally told me of her.”

“I remember. That was it.”

“Well then her will, at a given moment, broke down, and the collapse was determined by that fellow’s dastardly stroke. He told her, the scoundrel, that you and I are secretly engaged.”

Kate gave a quick glare. “But he doesn’t know it!”

“That doesn’t matter. She did by the time he had left her. Besides,” Densher added, “he does know it. When,” he continued, “did you last see him?”

But she was lost now in the picture before her. *“That* was what made her worse?”

He watched her take it in—it so added to her sombre beauty. Then he spoke as Mrs. Stringham had spoken. “She turned her face to the wall.”

“Poor Milly!” said Kate.

Slight as it was, her beauty somehow gave it style; so that he continued consistently: “She learned it, you see, too soon—since of course one’s idea had been that she might never even learn it at all. And she *had* felt sure—through everything we had done—of there not being between us, so far at least as you were concerned, anything she need regard as a warning.”

She took another moment for thought. “It wasn’t through anything you did—whatever that may have been—that she gained her certainty. It was by the conviction she got from me.”

“Oh it’s very handsome,” Densher said, “for you to take your share!”

“Do you suppose,” Kate asked, “that I think of denying it?”

Her look and her tone made him for the instant regret his comment, which indeed had been the first that rose to his lips as an effect absolutely of what they would have called between them her straightness. Her straightness, visibly, was all his own loyalty could ask. Still, that was comparatively beside the mark. “Of course I don’t suppose anything but that we’re together in our recognitions, our responsibilities—whatever we choose to call them. It isn’t a question for us of apportioning shares or distinguishing invidiously among such impressions as it was our idea to give.”

“It wasn’t *your* idea to give impressions,” said Kate.

He met this with a smile that he himself felt, in its strained character, as queer. “Don’t go into that!”

It was perhaps not as going into it that she had another idea—an idea born, she showed, of the vision he had just evoked. “Wouldn’t it have been possible then to deny the truth of the information ? I mean of Lord Mark’s.”

Densher wondered. “Possible for whom?”

“Why for you.”

“To tell her he lied?”

“To tell her he’s mistaken.”

Densher stared—he was stupefied; the “possible” thus glanced at by Kate being exactly the alternative he had had to face in Venice and to put utterly away from him. Nothing was stranger than such a difference in their view of it. “And to lie myself, you mean, to do it? We *are,* my dear child,” he said, “I suppose, still engaged.”

“Of course we’re still engaged. But to save her life—!”

He took in for a little the way she talked of it. Of course, it was to be remembered, she had always simplified, and it brought back his sense of the degree in which, to her energy as compared with his own, many things were easy; the very sense that so often before had moved him to admiration. “Well, if you must know—and I want you to be clear about it—I didn’t even seriously think of a denial to her face. The question of it—as possibly saving her—was put to me definitely enough; but to turn it over was only to dismiss it. Besides,” he added, “it wouldn’t have done any good.”

“You mean she would have had no faith in your correction?” She had spoken with a promptitude that affected him of a sudden as almost glib; but he himself paused with the overweight of all he meant, and she meanwhile went on. “Did you try?”

“I hadn’t even a chance.”

Kate maintained her wonderful manner, the manner of at once having it all before her and yet keeping it all at its distance. “She wouldn’t see you?”

“Not after your friend had been with her.”

She hesitated. “Couldn’t you write?”

It made him also think, but with a difference. “She had turned her face to the wall.”

This again for a moment hushed her, and they were both too grave now for parenthetic pity. But her interest came out for at least the minimum of light. “She refused even to let you speak to her?”

“My dear girl,” Densher returned, “she was miserably, prohibitively ill.”

“Well, that was what she had been before.”

“And it didn’t prevent? No,” Densher admitted, “it didn’t; and I don’t pretend that she’s not magnificent.”

“She’s prodigious,” said Kate Croy.

He looked at her a moment. “So are you, my dear. But that’s how it is,” he wound up; “and there we are.”

His idea had been in advance that she would perhaps sound him much more deeply, asking him above all two or three specific things. He had fairly fancied her even wanting to know and trying to find out how far, as the odious phrase was, he and Milly had gone, and how near, by the same token, they had come. He had asked himself if he were prepared to hear her do that, and had had to take for answer that he was prepared of course for everything. Wasn’t he prepared for her ascertaining if her two or three prophecies had found time to be made true? He had fairly believed himself ready to say whether or no the overture on Milly’s part promised according to the boldest of them had taken place. But what was in fact blessedly coming to him was that so far as such things were concerned his readiness wouldn’t be taxed. Kate’s pressure on the question of what had taken place remained so admirably general that even her present enquiry kept itself free of sharpness. “So then that after Lord Mark’s interference you never again met?”

It was what he had been all the while coming to. “No; we met once—so far as it could be called a meeting. I had stayed—I didn’t come away.”

“That,” said Kate, “was no more than decent.”

“Precisely”—he felt himself wonderful; “and I wanted to be no less. She sent for me, I went to her, and that night I left Venice.”

His companion waited. “Wouldn’t that then have been your chance?”

“To refute Lord Mark’s story? No, not even if before her there I had wanted to. What did it signify either? She was dying.”

“Well,” Kate in a manner persisted, “why not just *because* she was dying?” She had however all her discretion. “But of course I know that seeing her you could judge.”

“Of course seeing her I could judge. And I did see her! If I had denied you moreover,” Densher said with his eyes on her, “I’d have stuck to it.”

She took for a moment the intention of his face. “You mean that to convince her you’d have insisted or somehow proved—?”

“I mean that to convince *you* I’d have insisted or somehow proved—!”

Kate looked for her moment at a loss. “To convince ‘me’?”

“I wouldn’t have made my denial, in such conditions, only to take it back afterwards.”

With this quickly light came for her, and with it also her colour flamed. “Oh you’d have broken with me to make your denial a truth? You’d have ‘chucked’ me”—she embraced it perfectly—“to save your conscience?”

“I couldn’t have done anything else,” said Merton Densher. “So you see how right I was not to commit myself, and how little I could dream of it. If it ever again appears to you that I might have done so, remember what I say.”

Kate again considered, but not with the effect at once to which he pointed. “You’ve fallen in love with her.”

“Well then say so—with a dying woman. Why need you mind and what does it matter?”

It came from him, the question, straight out of the intensity of relation and the face-to-face necessity into which, from the first, from his entering the room, they had found themselves thrown; but it gave them their most extraordinary moment. “Wait till she is dead! Mrs. Stringham,” Kate added, “is to telegraph.” After which, in a tone still different, “For what then,” she asked, “did Milly send for you?”

“It was what I tried to make out before I went. I must tell you moreover that I had no doubt of its really being to give me, as you say, a chance. She believed, I suppose, that I *might* deny; and what, to my own mind, was before me in going to her was the certainty that she’d put me to my test. She wanted from my own lips—so I saw it—the truth. But I was with her for twenty minutes, and she never asked me for it.”

“She never wanted the truth”—Kate had a high headshake. “She wanted *you.* She would have taken from you what you could give her and been glad of it, even if she had known it false. You might have lied to her from pity, and she have seen you and felt you lie, and yet—since it was all for tenderness—she would have thanked you and blessed you and clung to you but the more. For that was your strength, my dear man—that she loves you with passion.” [26]

“Oh my ‘strength’!” Densher coldly murmured.

“Otherwise, since she had sent for you, what was it to ask of you?” And then—quite without irony—as he waited a moment to say: “Was it just once more to look at you?”

“She had nothing to ask of me—nothing, that is, but not to stay any longer. She did to that extent want to see me. She had supposed at first—after he had been with her—that I had seen the propriety of taking myself off. Then since I hadn’t—seeing my propriety as I did in another way—she found, days later, that I was still there. This,” said Densher, “affected her.”

“Of course it affected her.”

Again she struck him, for all her dignity, as glib. “If it was somehow for *her* I was still staying, she wished that to end, she wished me to know how little there was need of it. And as a manner of farewell she wished herself to tell me so.”

“And she did tell you so?”

“Face-to-face, yes. Personally, as she desired.”

“And as *you* of course did.”

“No, Kate,” he returned with all their mutual consideration; “not as I did. I hadn’t desired it in the least.”

“You only went to oblige her?”

“To oblige her. And of course also to oblige you.”

“Oh for myself certainly I’m glad.”

“‘Glad’?”—he echoed vaguely the way it rang out.

“I mean you did quite the right thing. You did it especially in having stayed. But that was all?” Kate went on. “That you mustn’t wait?”

“That was really all—and in perfect kindness.”

“Ah kindness naturally: from the moment she asked of you such a—well, such an effort. That you mustn’t wait—that was the point,” Kate added—“to see her die.”

“That was the point, my dear,” Densher said.

“And it took twenty minutes to make it?”

He thought a little. “I didn’t time it to a second. I paid her the visit—just like another.”

“Like another person?”

“Like another visit.”

“Oh!” said Kate. Which had apparently the effect of slightly arresting his speech—an arrest she took advantage of to continue; making with it indeed her nearest approach to an enquiry of the kind against which he had braced himself. “Did she receive you—in her condition—in her room?”

“Not she,” said Merton Densher. “She received me just as usual: in that glorious great *salone,*[bh] in the dress she always wears, from her inveterate corner on her sofa.” And his face for the moment conveyed the scene, just as hers equally embraced it. “Do you remember what you originally said to me of her?”

“Ah I’ve said so many things.”

“That she wouldn’t smell of drugs, that she wouldn’t taste of medicine. Well, she didn’t.”

“So that it was really almost happy?”

It took him a long time to answer, occupied as he partly was in feeling how nobody but Kate could have invested such a question with the tone that was perfectly right. She meanwhile, however, patiently waited. “I don’t think I can attempt to say now what it was. Some day—perhaps. For it would be worth it for us.”

“Some day—certainly.” She seemed to record the promise. Yet she spoke again abruptly. “She’ll recover.”

“Well,” said Densher, “you’ll see.”

She had the air an instant of trying to. “Did she show anything of her feeling? I mean,” Kate explained, “of her feeling of having been misled.”

She didn’t press hard, surely; but he had just mentioned that he would have rather to glide. “She showed nothing but her beauty and her strength.”

“Then,” his companion asked, “what’s the use of her strength?”

He seemed to look about for a use he could name; but he had soon given it up. “She must die, my dear, in her own extraordinary way.”

“Naturally. But I don’t see then what proof you have that she was ever alienated.”

“I have the proof that she refused for days and days to see me.”

“But she was ill.”

“That hadn’t prevented her—as you yourself a moment ago said—during the previous time. If it had been only illness it would have made no difference with her.”

“She would still have received you?”

“She would still have received me.”

“Oh well,” said Kate, “if you know—!”

“Of course I know. I know moreover as well from Mrs. Stringham.”

“And what does Mrs. Stringham know?”

“Everything.”

She looked at him longer. “Everything?”

“Everything.”

“Because you’ve told her?”

“Because she has seen for herself. I’ve told her nothing. She’s a person who does see.”

Kate thought. “That’s by her liking you too. She as well is prodigious. You see what interest in a man does. It does it all round. So you needn’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” said Densher.

Kate moved from her place then, looking at the clock, which marked five. She gave her attention to the tea-table, where Aunt Maud’s huge silver kettle, which had been exposed to its lamp and which she had not soon enough noticed, was hissing too hard. “Well, it’s all most wonderful!” she exclaimed as she rather too profusely—a sign her friend noticed—ladled tea into the pot. He watched her a moment at this occupation, coming nearer the table while she put in the steaming water. “You’ll have some?”

He hesitated. “Hadn’t we better wait—?”

“For Aunt Maud?” She saw what he meant—the deprecation, by their old law, of betrayals of the intimate note. “Oh you needn’t mind now. We’ve done it!”

“Humbugged her?”

“Squared her. You’ve pleased her.”

Densher mechanically accepted his tea. He was thinking of something else, and his thought in a moment came out. “What a brute then I must be!”

“A brute—?”

“To have pleased so many people.”

“Ah,” said Kate with a gleam of gaiety, “you’ve done it to please me.” But she was already, with her gleam, reverting a little. “What I don’t understand is—won’t you have any sugar?”

“Yes, pease.”

“What I don’t understand,” she went on when she had helped him, “is what it was that had occurred to bring her round again. If she gave you up for days and days, what brought her back to you?”

She asked the question with her own cup in her hand, but it found him ready enough in spite of his sense of the ironic oddity of their going into it over the tea-table. “It was Sir Luke Strett who brought her back. His visit, his presence there did it.”

“He brought her back then to life.”

“Well, to what I saw.”

“And by interceding for you?”

“I don’t think he interceded. I don’t indeed know what he did.”

Kate wondered. “Didn’t he tell you?”

“I didn’t ask him. I met him again, but we practically didn’t speak of her.”

Kate stared. “Then how do you know?”

“I see. I feel. I was with him again as I had been before—”

“Oh and you pleased him too? That was it?”

“He understood,” said Densher.

“But understood what?”

He waited a moment. “That I had meant awfully well.”

“Ah, and made *her* understand? I see,” she went on as he said nothing. “But how did he convince her?”

Densher put down his cup and turned away. “You must ask Sir Luke.”

He stood looking at the fire and there was a time without sound. “The great thing,” Kate then resumed, “is that she’s satisfied. Which,” she continued, looking across at him, “is what I’ve worked for.”

“Satisfied to die in the flower of her youth?”

“Well, at peace with you.”

“Oh ‘peace’!” he murmured with his eyes on the fire.

“The peace of having loved.”

He raised his eyes to her. “Is *that* peace?”

“Of having *been* loved,” she went on. “That is. Of having,” she wound up, “realized her passion. She wanted nothing more. She has had *all* she wanted.”

Lucid and always grave, she gave this out with a beautiful authority that he could for the time meet with no words. He could only again look at her, though with the sense in so doing that he made her more than he intended take his silence for assent. Quite indeed as if she did so take it she quitted the table and came to the fire. “You may think it hideous that I should now, that I should *yet”*—she made a point of the word—“pretend to draw conclusions. But we’ve not failed.”

“Oh!” he only again murmured.

She was once more close to him, close as she had been the day she came to him in Venice, the quickly returning memory of which intensified and enriched the fact. He could practically deny in such conditions nothing that she said, and what she said was, with it, visibly, a fruit of that knowledge. “We’ve succeeded.” She spoke with her eyes deep in his own. “She won’t have loved you for nothing.” It made him wince, but she insisted. “And you won’t have loved *me.”*

—II—

He was to remain for several days under the deep impression of this inclusive passage, so luckily prolonged from moment to moment, but interrupted at its climax, as may be said, by the entrance of Aunt Maud, who found them standing together near the fire. The bearings of the colloquy, however, sharp as they were, were less sharp to his intelligence, strangely enough, than those of a talk with Mrs. Lowder alone for which she soon gave him—or for which perhaps rather Kate gave him—full occasion. What had happened on her at last joining them was to conduce, he could immediately see, to her desiring to have him to herself. Kate and he, no doubt, at the opening of the door, had fallen apart with a certain suddenness, so that she had turned her hard fine eyes from one to the other; but the effect of this lost itself, to his mind, the next minute, in the effect of his companion’s rare alertness. She instantly spoke to her aunt of what had first been uppermost for herself, inviting her thereby intimately to join them, and doing it the more happily also, no doubt, because the fact she resentfully named gave her ample support. “Had you quite understood, my dear, that it’s full three weeks —?” And she effaced herself as if to leave Mrs. Lowder to deal from her own point of view with this extravagance. Densher of course straightway noted that his cue for the protection of Kate was to make, no

less, all of it he could; and their tracks, as he might have said, were fairly covered by the time their hostess had taken afresh, on his renewed admission, the measure of his scant eagerness. Kate had moved away as if no great showing were needed for her personal situation to be seen as delicate. She had been entertaining their visitor on her aunt's behalf—a visitor she had been at one time suspected of favoring too much and who had now come back to them as the stricken suitor of another person. It wasn't that the fate of the other person, her exquisite friend, didn't, in its tragic turn, also concern herself: it was only that her acceptance of Mr. Densher as a source of information could scarcely help having an awkwardness. She invented the awkwardness under Densher's eyes, and he marvelled on his side at the instant creation. It served her as the fine cloud that hangs about a goddess in an epic, and the young man was but vaguely to know at what point of the rest of his visit she had, for consideration, melted into it and out of sight.

He was taken up promptly with another matter—the truth of the remarkable difference, neither more nor less, that the events of Venice had introduced into his relation with Aunt Maud and that these weeks of their separation had caused quite richly to ripen for him. She had not sat down to her tea-table before he felt himself on terms with her that were absolutely new, nor could she press on him a second cup without her seeming herself, and quite wittingly, so to define and establish them. She regretted, but she quite understood, that what was taking place had obliged him to hang off; they had—after hearing of him from poor Susan as gone—been hoping for an early sight of him; they would have been interested, naturally, in his arriving straight from the scene. Yet she needed no reminder that the scene precisely—by which she meant the tragedy that had so detained and absorbed him, the memory, the shadow, the sorrow of it—was what marked him for unsociability. She thus presented him to himself, as it were, in the guise in which she had now adopted him, and it was the element of truth in the character that he found himself, for his own part, adopting. She treated him as blighted and ravaged, as frustrate and already bereft; and for him to feel that this opened for him a new chapter of frankness with her he scarce had also to perceive how it smoothed his approaches to Kate. It made the latter accessible as she hadn't yet begun to be; it set up for him at Lancaster Gate an association positively hostile to any other legend. It was quickly vivid to him that, were he minded, he could "work" this association : he had but to use the house freely for his prescribed attitude and he need hardly ever be out of it. Stranger than anything moreover was to be the way that by the end of a week he stood convicted to his own sense of a surrender to Mrs. Lowder's view. He had somehow met it at a point that had brought him on—brought him on a distance that he couldn't again retrace. He had private hours of wondering what had become of his sincerity; he had others of simply reflecting that he had it all in use. His only want of candor was Aunt Maud's wealth of sentiment. She was hugely sentimental, and the worst he did was to take it from her. He wasn't so himself—everything was too real; but it was none the less not false that he *had* been through a mill.

It was in particular not false for instance that when she had said to him, on the Sunday, almost cozily, from her sofa behind the tea, "I want you not to doubt, you poor dear, that I'm *with* you to the end!" his meeting her halfway had been the only course open to him. She was with him to the end—or she might be—in a way Kate wasn't; and even if it literally made her society meanwhile more soothing he must just brush away the question of why it shouldn't. Was he professing to her in any degree the possession of an aftersense that wasn't real? How in the world could he, when his aftersense, day by day, was his greatest reality? Such only was at bottom what there was between them, and two or three times over it made the hour pass. These were occasions—two and a scrap-on which he had come and gone without mention of Kate. Now that almost as never yet he had license to ask for her, the queer turn of their affair made it a false note. It was another queer turn that when he talked with Aunt Maud about Milly nothing else seemed to come up. He called upon her almost avowedly for that purpose, and it was the queerest turn of all that the state of his nerves should require it. He liked her better; he was really behaving, he had occasion to say to himself, as if he liked her best. The thing was absolutely that she met *him* halfway. Nothing could have been broader than her vision, than her loquacity, than her sympathy. It appeared to gratify, to satisfy her to see him as he was; that too had its effect. It was all of course the last thing that could have seemed on the cards, a change by which he was completely *free* with this lady; and it wouldn't indeed have come about if—for another monstrosity—he hadn't ceased to be free with Kate. Thus it was that on the third time in especial of being alone with her he found himself uttering to the elder woman what had been impossible of utterance to the younger. Mrs. Lowder gave him in fact, on the ground of what he must keep from her, but one uneasy moment. That was when, on the first Sunday, after Kate had suppressed herself, she referred to her regret that he mightn't have stayed to the end. He found his reason difficult to give her, but she came after all to his help.

"You simply couldn't stand it?"

"I simply couldn't stand it. Besides you see—!" But he paused.

"Besides what?" He had been going to say more—then he saw dangers; luckily however she had again assisted him. "Besides—oh I know!—men haven't, in many relations, the courage of women."

"They haven't the courage of women."

“Kate or I would have stayed,” she declared—“if we hadn’t come away for the special reason that you so frankly appreciated.”

Densher had said nothing about his appreciation: hadn’t his behaviour since the hour itself sufficiently shown it? But he presently said—he couldn’t help going so far: “I don’t doubt, certainly, that Miss Croy would have stayed.” And he saw again into the bargain what a marvel was Susan Shepherd. She did nothing but protect him—she had done nothing but keep it up. In copious communication with the friend of her youth she had yet, it was plain, favored this lady with nothing that compromised him. Milly’s act of renouncement she had described but as a change for the worse; she had mentioned Lord Mark’s descent, as even without her it might be known, so that she mustn’t appear to conceal it; but she had suppressed explanations and connexions, and indeed, for all he knew, blessed Puritan soul, had invented commendable fictions. Thus it was absolutely that he was at his ease. Thus it was that, shaking for ever, in the unrest that didn’t drop, his crossed leg, he leaned back in deep yellow satin chairs and took such comfort as came. She asked, it was true, Aunt Maud, questions that Kate hadn’t; but this was just the difference, that from her he positively liked them. He had taken with himself on leaving Venice the resolution to regard Milly as already dead to him—that being for his spirit the only thinkable way to pass the time of waiting. He had left her because it was what suited her, and it wasn’t for him to go, as they said in America, behind this; which imposed on him but the sharper need to arrange himself with his interval. Suspense was the ugliest ache to him, and he would have nothing to do with it; the last thing he wished was to be unconscious of her—what he wished to ignore was her own consciousness, tortured, for all he knew, crucified by its pain. Knowingly to hang about in London while the pain went on—what would that do but make his days impossible? His scheme was accordingly to convince himself—and by some art about which he was vague—that the sense of waiting had passed. “What in fact,” he restlessly reflected, “have I any further to do with it? Let me assume the thing actually over—as it at any moment may be—and I become good again for something at least to somebody. I’m good, as it is, for nothing to anybody, least of all to *her.”* He consequently tried, so far as shutting his eyes and stalking grimly about was a trial; but his plan was carried out, it may well be guessed, neither with marked success nor with marked consistency. The days, whether lapsing or lingering, were a stiff reality; the suppression of anxiety was a thin idea; the taste of life itself was the taste of suspense. That he *was* waiting was in short at the bottom of everything ; and it required no great sifting presently to feel that if he took so much more, as he called it, to Mrs. Lowder this was just for that reason.

She helped him to hold out, all the while that she was subtle enough—and he could see her divine it as what he wanted—not to insist on the actuality of their tension. His nearest approach to success was thus in being good for something to Aunt Maud, in default of anyone better; her company eased his nerves even while they pretended together that they had seen their tragedy out. They spoke of the dying girl in the past tense; they said no worse of her than that she had *been* stupendous. On the other hand, however— and this was what wasn’t for Densher pure peace—they insisted enough that stupendous was the word. It was the thing, this recognition, that kept him most quiet; he came to it with her repeatedly; talking about it against time and, in particular, we have noted, speaking of his supreme personal impression as he hadn’t spoken to Kate. It was almost as if she herself enjoyed the perfection of the pathos; she sat there before the scene, as he couldn’t help giving it out to her, very much as a stout citizen’s wife might have sat, during a play that made people cry, in the pit or the family-circle. What most deeply stirred her was the way the poor girl must have wanted to live.

“Ah yes indeed—she did, she did: why in pity shouldn’t she, with everything to fill her world? The mere money of her, the darling, if it isn’t too disgusting at such a time to mention that—!”

Aunt Maud mentioned it—and Densher quite understood—but as fairly giving poetry to the life Milly clung to: a view of the “might have been” before which the good lady was hushed anew to tears. She had had her own vision of these possibilities, and her own social use for them, and since Milly’s spirit had been after all so at one with her about them, what was the cruelty of the event but a cruelty, of a sort, to herself? That came out when he named, as the horrible thing to know, the fact of their young friend’s unapproachable terror of the end, keep it down though she would; coming out therefore often, since in so naming it he found the strangest of reliefs. He allowed it all its vividness, as if on the principle of his not at least spiritually shirking. Milly had held with passion to her dream of a future, and she was separated from it, not shrieking indeed, but grimly, awfully silent, as one might imagine some noble young victim of the scaffold, in the French Revolution, separated at the prison-door from some object clutched for resistance. Densher, in a cold moment, so pictured the case for Mrs. Lowder, but no moment cold enough had yet come to make him so picture it to Kate. And it was the front so presented that had been, in Milly, heroic; presented with the highest heroism, Aunt Maud by this time knew, on the occasion of his taking leave of her. He had let her know, absolutely for the girl’s glory, how he had been received on that occasion: with a positive effect—since she was indeed so perfectly the princess that Mrs. Stringham always called her—of princely state.

Before the fire in the great room that was all arabesques and cherubs, all gaiety and gilt, and that was warm at that hour too with a wealth of autumn sun, the state in question had been maintained and the situation—well, Densher said for the convenience of exquisite London gossip, sublime. The gossip—for it came

to as much at Lancaster Gate—wasn't the less exquisite for his use of the silver veil, nor on the other hand was the veil, so touched, too much drawn aside. He himself for that matter took in the scene again at moments as from the page of a book. He saw a young man far off and in a relation inconceivable, saw him hushed, passive, staying his breath, but half understanding, yet dimly conscious of something immense and holding himself painfully together not to lose it. The young man at these moments so seen was too distant and too strange for the right identity; and yet, outside, afterwards, it was his own face Densher had known. He had known then at the same time what the young man had been conscious of, and he was to measure after that, day by day, how little he had lost. At present there with Mrs. Lowder he knew he had gathered all—that passed between them mutely as in the intervals of their associated gaze they exchanged looks of intelligence. This was as far as association could go, but it was far enough when she knew the essence. The essence was that something had happened to him too beautiful and too sacred to describe. He had been, to his recovered sense, forgiven, dedicated, blessed; but this he couldn't coherently express. It would have required an explanation—fatal to Mrs. Lowder's faith in him—of the nature of Milly's wrong. So, as to the wonderful scene, they just stood at the door. They had the sense of the presence within—they felt the charged stillness; after which, their association deepened by it, they turned together away.

That itself indeed, for our restless friend, became by the end of a week the very principle of reaction: so that he woke up one morning with such a sense of having played a part as he needed self-respect to gainsay. He hadn't in the least stated at Lancaster Gate that, as a haunted man—a man haunted with a memory—he was harmless; but the degree to which Mrs. Lowder accepted, admired and explained his new aspect laid upon him practically the weight of a declaration. What he hadn't in the least stated her own manner was perpetually stating; it was as haunted and harmless that she was constantly putting him down. There offered itself however to his purpose such an element as plain honesty, and he had embraced, by the time he dressed, his proper corrective. They were on the edge of Christmas, but Christmas this year was, as in the London of so many other years, disconcertingly mild; the still air was soft, the thick light was grey, the great town looked empty, and in the Park, where the grass was green, where the sheep browsed, where the birds multitudinously twittered, the straight walks lent themselves to slowness and the dim vistas to privacy. He held it fast this morning till he had got out, his sacrifice to honour, and then went with it to the nearest post-office and fixed it fast in a telegram; thinking of it moreover as a sacrifice only because he had, for reasons, felt it as an effort. Its character of effort it would owe to Kate's expected resistance, not less probable than on the occasion of past appeals; which was precisely why he—perhaps innocently—made his telegram persuasive. It had, as a recall of tender hours, to be, for the young woman at the counter, a trifle cryptic; but there was a good deal of it in one way and another, representing as it did a rich impulse and costing him a couple of shillings. There was also a moment later on, that day, when, in the Park, as he measured watchfully one of their old alleys, he might have been supposed by a cynical critic to be reckoning his chance of getting his money back. He was waiting—but he had waited of old; Lancaster Gate as a danger was practically at hand—but she had risked that danger before. Besides it was smaller now, with the queer turn of their affair; in spite of which indeed he was graver as he lingered and looked out.

Kate came at last by the way he had thought least likely, came as if she had started from the Marble Arch; but her advent was response—that was the great matter; response marked in her face and agreeable to him, even after Aunt Maud's responses, as noting had been since his return to London. She had not, it was true, answered his wire, and he had begun to fear, as she was late, that with the instinct of what he might be again intending to press upon her she had decided—though not with ease - to deprive him of his chance. He would have of course, she knew, other chances, but she perhaps saw the present as offering her special danger. This, in fact, Densher could himself feel, was exactly why he had so prepared it, and he had rejoiced, even while he waited, in all that the conditions had to say to him of their simpler and better time. The shortest day of the year though it might be, it was, in the same place, by a whim of the weather, almost as much to their purpose as the days of sunny afternoons when they had taken their first trysts. This and that tree, within sight, on the grass, stretched bare boughs over the couple of chairs in which they had sat of old and in which—for they really could sit down again—they might recover the clearness of their prime. It was to all intents however this very reference that showed itself in Kate's face as, with her swift motion, she came toward him. It helped him, her swift motion, when it finally brought her nearer; helped him, for that matter, at first, if only by showing him afresh how terribly well she looked. It had been all along, he certainly remembered, a phenomenon of no rarity that he had felt her, at particular moments, handsomer than ever before; one of these for instance being still present to him as her entrance, under her aunt's eyes, at Lancaster Gate, the day of his dinner there after his return from America; and another her aspect on the same spot two Sundays ago—the light in which she struck the eyes he had brought back from Venice. In the course of a minute or two now he got, as he had got it the other times, his apprehension of the special stamp of the fortune of the moment.

Whatever it had been determined by as the different hours recurred to him, it took on at present a prompt connexion with an effect produced for him in truth more than once during the past week, only now much intensified. This effect he had already noted and named: it was that of the attitude assumed by his friend in the presence of the degree of response on his part to Mrs. Lowder's welcome which she couldn't possibly have

failed to notice. She had noticed it, and she had beautifully shown him so; wearing in its honour the finest shade of studied serenity, a shade almost of gaiety over the workings of time. Everything of course was relative, with the shadow they were living under; but her condonation of the way in which he now, for confidence, distinguished Aunt Maud had almost the note of cheer. She had so by her own air consecrated the distinction, invidious in respect to herself though it might be; and nothing, really, more than this demonstration, could have given him had he still wanted it the measure of her superiority. It was doubtless for that matter this superiority alone that on the winter noon gave smooth decision to her step and charming courage to her eyes—a courage that deepened in them when he had presently got to what he did want. He had delayed after she had joined him not much more than long enough for him to say to her, drawing her hand into his arm and turning off where they had turned of old, that he wouldn't pretend he hadn't lately had moments of not quite believing he should ever again be so happy. She answered, passing over the reasons, whatever they had been, of his doubt, that her own belief was in high happiness for them if they would only have patience; though nothing at the same time could be dearer than his idea for their walk. It was only make-believe of course, with what had taken place for them, that they couldn't meet at home; she spoke of their opportunities as suffering at no point. He had at any rate soon let her know that he wished the present one to suffer at none, and in a quiet spot, beneath a great wintry tree, he let his entreaty come sharp.

"We've played our dreadful game and we've lost. We owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our feeling for ourselves and for each other, not to wait another day. Our marriage will—fundamentally, somehow, don't you see?—right everything that's wrong, and I can't express to you my impatience. We've only to announce it—and it takes off the weight."

"To 'announce' it?" Kate asked. She spoke as if not understanding, though she had listened to him without confusion.

"To accomplish it then-to-morrow if you will; *do* it and announce it as done. That's the least part of it—after it nothing will matter. We shall be so right," he said, "that we shall be strong; we shall only wonder at our past fear. It will seem an ugly madness. It will seem a bad dream."

She looked at him without flinching—with the look she had brought at his call; but he felt now the strange chill of her brightness. "My dear man, what has happened to you?"

"Well, that I can bear it no longer. *That's* simply what has happened. Something has snapped, has broken in me, and here I am. It's *as* I am that you must have me."

He saw her try for a time to appear to consider it; but he saw her also not consider it. Yet he saw her, felt her, further—he heard her, with her clear voice—try to be intensely kind with him. "I don't see, you know, what has changed." She had a large strange smile. "We've been going on together so well, and you suddenly desert me?"

It made him helplessly gaze. "You call it so 'well'? You've touches, upon my soul!—"

"I call it perfect—from my original point of view. I'm just where I was; and you must give me some better reason than you do, my dear, for your not being. It seems to me," she continued, "that we're only right as to what has been between us so long as we do wait. I don't think we wish to have behaved like fools." He took in while she talked her imperturbable consistency; which it was quietly, queerly hopeless to see her stand there and breathe into their mild remembering air. He had brought her there to be moved, and she was only immoveable—which was not moreover, either, because she didn't understand. She understood everything, and things he refused to; and she had reasons, deep down, the sense of which nearly sickened him. She had too again most of all her strange significant smile. "Of course if it's that you really know something—?" It was quite conceivable and possible to her, he could see, that he did. But he didn't even know what she meant, and he only looked at her in gloom. His gloom however didn't upset her. "You do, I believe, only you've a delicacy about saying it. Your delicacy to me, my dear, is a scruple too much. I should have no delicacy in hearing it, so that if you can *tell* me you know—"

"Well?" he asked as she still kept what depended on it.

"Why then I'll do what you want. We needn't, I grant you, in that case wait; and I can see what you mean by thinking it nicer of us not to. I don't even ask you," she continued, "for a proof. I'm content with your moral certainty."

By this time it had come over him—it had the force of a rush. The point she made was clear, as clear as that the blood, while he recognized it, mantled in his face. "I know nothing whatever."

"You've not an idea?"

"I've not an idea."

"I'd consent," she said—"I'd announce it to-morrow, to-day, I'd go home this moment and announce it to

Aunt Maud, for an idea: I mean an idea straight *from* you, I mean as your own, given me in good faith. There, my dear!"—and she smiled again. "I call that really meeting you."

If it *was* then what she called it, it disposed of his appeal, and he could but stand there with his wasted passion—for it was in high passion that he had from the morning acted—in his face. She made it all out, bent upon her—the idea he didn't have, and the idea he had, and his failure of insistence when it brought up *that* challenge, and his sense of her personal presence, and his horror, almost, of her lucidity. They made in him a mixture that might have been rage, but that was turning quickly to mere cold thought, thought which led to something else and was like a new dim dawn. It affected her then, and she had one of the impulses, in all sincerity, that had before this, between them, saved their position. When she had come nearer to him, when, putting her hand upon him, she made him sink with her, as she leaned to him, into their old pair of chairs, she prevented irresistibly, she forestalled the waste of his passion. She had an advantage with his passion now.

—III—

He had said to her in the Park when challenged on it that nothing had "happened" to him as a cause for the demand he there made of her—happened he meant since the account he had given, after his return, of his recent experience. But in the course of a few days—they had brought him to Christmas morning—he was conscious enough, in preparing again to seek her out, of a difference on that score. Something *had* in this case happened to him, and, after his taking the night to think of it he felt that what it most, if not absolutely first, involved was his immediately again putting himself in relation with her. The fact itself had met him there—in his own small quarters—on Christmas Eve, and had not then indeed at once affected him as implying that consequence. So far as he on the spot and for the next hours took its measure—a process that made his night mercilessly wakeful—the consequences possibly implied were numerous to distraction. His spirit dealt with them, in the darkness, as the slow hours passed; his intelligence and his imagination, his soul and his sense, had never on the whole been so intensely engaged. It was his difficulty for the moment that he was face to face with alternatives, and that it was scarce even a question of turning from one to the other. They were not in a perspective in which they might be compared and considered; they were, by a strange effect, as close as a pair of monsters of whom he might have felt on either cheek the hot breath and the huge eyes. He saw them at once and but by looking straight before him; he wouldn't for that matter, in his cold apprehension, have turned his head by an inch. So it was that his agitation was still—was not, for the slow hours, a matter of restless motion. He lay long, after the event, on the sofa where, extinguishing at a touch the white light of convenience that he hated, he had thrown himself without undressing. He stared at the buried day and wore out the time; with the arrival of the Christmas dawn moreover, late and grey, he felt himself somehow determined. The common wisdom had had its say to him—that safety in doubt was not action; and perhaps what most helped him was this very commonness. In his case there was nothing of *that*— in no case in his life had there ever been less: which association, from one thing to another, now worked for him as a choice. He acted, after his bath and his breakfast, in the sense of that marked element of the rare which he felt to be the sign of his crisis. And that is why, dressed with more state than usual and quite as if for church, he went out into the soft Christmas day.

Action, for him, on coming to the point, it appeared, carried with it a certain complexity. We should have known, walking by his side, that his final prime decision hadn't been to call at the door of Sir Luke Strett, and yet that this step, though subordinate, was none the less urgent. His prime decision was for another matter, to which impatience, once he was on the way, had now added itself; but he remained sufficiently aware that he must compromise with the perhaps excessive earliness. This, and the ferment set up within him, were together a reason for not driving; to say nothing of the absence of cabs in the dusky festal desert. Sir Luke's great square was not near, but he walked the distance without seeing a hansom. He had his interval thus to turn over his view—the view to which what had happened the night before had not sharply reduced itself; but the complexity just mentioned was to be offered within the next few minutes another item to assimilate. Before Sir Luke's house, when he reached it, a brougham was drawn up—at the sight of which his heart had a lift that brought him for the instant to a stand. This pause wasn't long, but it was long enough to flash upon him a revelation in the light of which he caught his breath. The carriage, so possibly at such an hour and on such a day Sir Luke's own, had struck him as a sign that the great doctor was back. This would prove something else, in turn, still more intensely, and it was in the act of the double apprehension that Densher felt himself turn pale. His mind rebounded for the moment like a projectile that has suddenly been met by another: he stared at the strange truth that what he wanted *more* than to see Kate Croy was to see the witness who had just arrived from Venice. He wanted positively to be in his presence and to hear his voice—which was the spasm of his consciousness that produced the flash. Fortunately for him, on the spot, there supervened something in which the flash went out. He became aware within this minute that the coachman on the box of the brougham had a

face known to him, whereas he had never seen before, to his knowledge, the great doctor's carriage. The carriage, as he came nearer, was simply Mrs. Lowder's; the face on the box was just the face that, in coming and going at Lancaster Gate, he would vaguely have noticed, outside, in attendance. With this the rest came: the lady of Lancaster Gate had, on a prompting not wholly remote from his own, presented herself for news; and news, in the house, she was clearly getting, since her brougham had stayed. Sir Luke *was* then back—only Mrs. Lowder was with him.

It was under the influence of this last reflexion that Densher again delayed; and it was while he delayed that something else occurred to him. It was all round, visibly—given his own new contribution—a case of pressure; and in a case of pressure Kate, for quicker knowledge, might have come out with her aunt. The possibility that in this event she might be sitting in the carriage—the thing most likely—had had the effect, before he could check it, of bringing him within range of the window. It wasn't there he had wished to see her; yet if she *was* there he couldn't pretend not to. What he had however the next moment made out was that if some one was there it wasn't Kate Croy. It was, with a sensible shock for him, the person who had last offered him a conscious face from behind the clear plate of a café in Venice. The great glass at Florian's was a medium less obscure, even with the window down, than the air of London Christmas; yet at present also, none the less, between the two men, an exchange of recognitions could occur. Densher felt his own look a gaping arrest—which, he disgustedly remembered, his back as quickly turned, appeared to repeat itself as his special privilege. He mounted the steps of the house and touched the bell with a keen consciousness of being habitually looked at by Kate's friend from positions of almost insolent vantage. He forgot for the time the moment when, in Venice, at the palace, the encouraged young man had in a manner assisted at the departure of the disconcerted, since Lord Mark was not looking disconcerted now any more than he had looked from his bench at his café. Densher was thinking that he seemed to show as vagrant while another was ensconced. He was thinking of the other as—in spite of the difference of situation—more ensconced than ever; he was thinking of him above all as the friend of the person with whom his recognition had, the minute previous, associated him. The man was seated in the very place in which, beside Mrs. Lowder's, he had looked to find Kate, and that was a sufficient identity. Meanwhile at any rate the door of the house had opened and Mrs. Lowder stood before him. It was something at least that *she* wasn't Kate. She was herself, on the spot, in all her affluence; with presence of mind both to decide at once that Lord Mark, in the brougham, didn't matter and to prevent Sir Luke's butler, by a firm word thrown over her shoulder, from standing there to listen to her passage with the gentleman who had rung. *"I'll* tell Mr. Densher; you needn't wait!" And the passage, promptly and richly, took place on the steps.

"He arrives, travelling straight, to-morrow early. I couldn't not come to learn."

"No more," said Densher simply, "could I. On my way," he added, "to Lancaster Gate."

"Sweet of you." She beamed on him dimly, and he saw her face was attuned. It made him, with what she had just before said, know all, and he took the thing in while he met the air of portentous, of almost functional, sympathy that had settled itself as her medium with him and that yet had now a fresh glow. "So you *have* your message?"

He knew so well what she meant, and so equally with it what he *"had* had" no less than what he hadn't, that, with but the smallest hesitation, he strained the point. "Yes—my message."

"Our dear dove then, as Kate calls her, has folded her wonderful wings."

"Yes—folded them."

It rather racked him, but he tried to receive it as she intended, and she evidently took his formal assent for self-control. "Unless it's more true," she accordingly added, "that she has spread them the wider."

He again but formally assented, though, strangely enough, the words fitted a figure deep in his own imagination. "Rather, yes—spread them the wider."

"For a flight, I trust, to some happiness greater—!"

"Exactly. Greater," Densher broke in; but now with a look, he feared, that did a little warn her off.

"You were certainly," she went on with more reserve, "entitled to direct news. Ours came late last night: I'm not sure otherwise, I shouldn't have gone to you. But you're coming," she asked, "to me?"

He had had a minute by this time to think further, and the window of the brougham was still within range. Her rich "me," reaching him moreover through the mild damp, had the effect of a thump on his chest. "Squared," Aunt Maud? She was indeed squared, and the extent of it just now perversely enough took away his breath. His look from where they stood embraced the aperture at which the person sitting in the carriage might have shown, and he saw his interlocutress, on her side, understand the question in it, which he moreover then uttered. "Shall you be alone?" It was, as an immediate instinctive parley with the image of his

condition that now flourished in her, almost hypocritical. It sounded as if he wished to come and overflow to her, yet this was exactly what he didn't. The need to overflow had suddenly—since the night before—dried up in him, and he had never been aware of a deeper reserve.

But she had meanwhile largely responded. "Completely alone. I should otherwise never have dreamed; feeling, dear friend, but too much!" Failing on her lips what she felt came out for him in the offered hand with which she had the next moment consolingly pressed his own. "Dear friend, dear friend!"—she was deeply "with" him, and she wished to be still more so: which was what made her immediately continue. "Or wouldn't you this evening, for the sad Christmas it makes us, dine with me *tête-à-tête?"*

It put the thing off, the question of a talk with her—making the difference, to his relief, of several hours; but it also rather mystified him. This however didn't diminish his need of caution. "Shall you mind if I don't tell you at once?"

"Not in the least—leave it open: it shall be as you may feel, and you needn't even send me word. I only will mention that to-day, of all days, I shall otherwise sit there alone."

Now at least he could ask. "Without Miss Croy?"

"Without Miss Croy. Miss Croy," said Mrs. Lowder, "is spending her Christmas in the bosom of her more immediate family."

He was afraid, even while he spoke, of what his face might show. "You mean she has left you?"

Aunt Maud's own face for that matter met the enquiry with a consciousness in which he saw a reflexion of events. He was made sure by it, even at the moment and as he had never been before, that since he had known these two women no confessed nor commented tension, no crisis of the cruder sort would really have taken form between them: which was precisely a high proof of how Kate had steered her boat. The situation exposed in Mrs. Lowder's present expression lighted up by contrast that superficial smoothness; which afterwards, with his time to think of it, was to put before him again the art, the particular gift, in the girl, now so placed and classed, so intimately familiar for him, as her talent for life. The peace, within a day or two—since his seeing her last—had clearly been broken; differences, deep down, kept there by a diplomacy on Kate's part as deep, had been shaken to the surface by some exceptional jar; with which, in addition, he felt Lord Mark's odd attendance at such an hour and season vaguely associated. The talent for life indeed, it at the same time struck him, would probably have shown equally in the breach, or whatever had occurred; Aunt Maud having suffered, he judged, a strain rather than a stroke. Of these quick thoughts, at all events, that lady was already abreast. "She went yesterday morning—and not with my approval, I don't mind telling you—to her sister: Mrs. Condrip, if you know who I mean, who lives somewhere in Chelsea. My other niece and her affairs—that I should have to say such things to-day!—are a constant worry; so that Kate, in consequence—well, of events!—has simply been called in. My own idea, I'm bound to say, was that with *such* events she need have, in her situation, next to nothing to do."

"But she differed with you?"

"She differed with me. And when Kate differs with you—!"

"Oh I can imagine." He had reached the point in the scale of hypocrisy at which he could ask himself why a little more or less should signify. Besides, with the intention he had had he must know. Kate's move, if he didn't know, might simply disconcert him; and of being disconcerted his horror was by this time fairly superstitious. "I hope you don't allude to events at all calamitous."

"No—only horrid and vulgar."

"Oh!" said Merton Densher.

Mrs. Lowder's soreness, it was still not obscure, had discovered in free speech to him a momentary balm. "They've the misfortune to have, I suppose you know, a dreadful horrible father."

"Oh!" said Densher again.

"He's too bad almost to name, but he has come upon Marian, and Marian has shrieked for help."

Densher wondered at this with intensity; and his curiosity compromised for an instant with his discretion. "Come upon her—for money?"

"Oh for that of course always. But, at *this* blessed season, for refuge, for safety: for God knows what. He's *there,* the brute. And Kate's with them. And that," Mrs. Lowder wound up, going down the steps, "is her Christmas."

She had stopped again at the bottom while he thought of an answer. "Yours then is after all rather better."

“It’s at least more decent.” And her hand once more came out. “But why do I talk of *our* troubles? Come if you can.”

He showed a faint smile. “Thanks. If I can.”

“And now—I dare say—you’ll go to church?”

She had asked it, with her good intention, rather in the air and by way of sketching for him, in the line of support, something a little more to the purpose than what she had been giving him. He felt it as finishing off their intensities of expression that he found himself to all appearance receiving her hint as happy. “Why yes—I think I will”: after which, as the door of the brougham, at her approach, had opened from within, he was free to turn his back. He heard the door, behind him, sharply close again and the vehicle move off in another direction than his own.

He had in fact for the time no direction; in spite of which indeed he was at the end of ten minutes aware of having walked straight to the south. That, he afterwards recognized, was, very sufficiently, because there had formed itself in his mind, even while Aunt Maud finally talked, an instant recognition of his necessary course. Nothing was open to him but to follow Kate, nor was anything more marked than the influence of the step she had taken on the emotion itself that possessed him. Her complications, which had fairly, with everything else, an awful sound—what were they, a thousand times over, but his own? His present business was to see that they didn’t escape an hour longer taking their proper place in his life. He accordingly would have held his course hadn’t it suddenly come over him that he had just lied to Mrs. Lowder—a term it perversely eased him to keep using—even more than was necessary. To what church was he going, to what church, in such a state of his nerves, *could* he go?—he pulled up short again, as he had pulled up in sight of Mrs. Lowder’s carriage, to ask it. And yet the desire queerly stirred in him not to have wasted his word. He was just then however by a happy chance in the Brompton Road, and he bethought himself with a sudden light that the Oratory[bi] was at hand. He had but to turn the other way and he should find himself soon before it. At the door then, in a few minutes, his idea was really—as it struck him—consecrated: he was, pushing in, on the edge of a splendid service—the flocking crowd told of it—which glittered and resounded, from distant depths, in the blaze of altar-lights and the swell of organ and choir. It didn’t match his own day, but it was much less of a discord than some other things actual and possible. The Oratory in short, to make him right, would do.

—IV—

The difference was thus that the dusk of afternoon—dusk thick from an early hour—had gathered when he knocked at Mrs. Condrip’s door. He had gone from the church to his club, wishing not to present himself in Chelsea at luncheon-time and also remembering that he must attempt independently to make a meal. This, in the event, he but imperfectly achieved: he dropped into a chair in the great dim void of the club library, with nobody, up or down, to be seen, and there after a while, closing his eyes, recovered an hour of the sleep he had lost during the night. Before doing this indeed he had written—it was the first thing he did—a short note, which, in the Christmas desolation of the place, he had managed only with difficulty and doubt to commit to a messenger. He wished it carried by hand, and he was obliged, rather blindly, to trust the hand, as the messenger, for some reason, was unable to return with a gage of delivery. When at four o’clock he was face to face with Kate in Mrs. Condrip’s small drawing-room he found to his relief that his notification had reached her. She was expectant and to that extent prepared; which simplified a little—if a little, at the present pass, counted. Her conditions were vaguely vivid to him from the moment of his coming in, and vivid partly by their difference, a difference sharp and suggestive, from those in which he had hitherto constantly seen her. He had seen her but in places comparatively great; in her aunt’s pompous house, under the high trees of Kensington and the storied ceilings of Venice. He had seen her, in Venice, on a great occasion, as the centre itself of the splendid Piazza: he had seen her there, on a still greater one, in his own poor rooms, which yet had consorted with her, having state and ancientry even in their poorness; but Mrs. Condrip’s interior, even by this best view of it and though not flagrantly mean, showed itself as a setting almost grotesquely inapt. Pale, grave and charming, she affected him at once as a distinguished stranger—stranger to the little Chelsea street—who was making the best of a queer episode and a place of exile. The extraordinary thing was that at the end of three minutes he felt himself less appointedly a stranger in it than she.

A part of the queerness—this was to come to him in glimpses—sprang from the air as of a general large misfit imposed on the narrow room by the scale and mass of its furniture. The objects, the ornaments were, for the sisters, clearly relics and survivals of what would, in the case of Mrs. Condrip at least, have been called better days. The curtains that overdraped the windows, the sofas and tables that stayed circulation, the chimney-ornaments that reached to the ceiling and the florid chandelier that almost dropped to the floor, were so many mementoes of earlier homes and so many links with their unhappy mother. Whatever might

have been in itself the quality of these elements Densher could feel the effect proceeding from them, as they lumpishly blocked out the decline of the dim day, to be ugly almost to the point of the sinister. They failed to accommodate or to compromise; they asserted their differences without tact and without taste. It was truly having a sense of Kate's own quality thus promptly to see them in reference to it. But that Densher had this sense was no new thing to him, nor did he in strictness need, for the hour, to be reminded of it. He only knew, by one of the tricks, his imagination so constantly played him, that he was, so far as her present tension went, very specially sorry for her—which was not the view that had determined his start in the morning; yet also that he himself would have taken it all, as he might say, less hard. He could have lived in such a place; but it wasn't given to those of his complexion, so to speak, to be exiled anywhere. It was by their comparative grossness that they could somehow make shift. His natural, his inevitable, his ultimate home—left, that is, to itself—wasn't at all unlikely to be as queer and impossible as what was just round them, though doubtless in less ample masses. As he took in moreover how Kate wouldn't have been in the least the creature she was if what was just round them hadn't mismatched her, hadn't made for her a medium involving compunction in the spectator, so, by the same stroke, that became the very fact of her relation with her companions there, such a fact as filled him at once, oddly, both with assurance and with suspense. If he himself, on this brief vision, felt her as alien and as ever so unwittingly ironic, how must they not feel her and how above all must she not feel them?

Densher could ask himself that even after she had presently lighted the tall candles on the mantel-shelf. This was all their illumination but the fire, and she had proceeded to it with a quiet dryness that yet left play, visibly, to her implication between them, in their trouble and failing anything better, of the presumably genial Christmas hearth. So far as the genial went this had in strictness, given their conditions, to be all their geniality. He had told her in his note nothing but that he must promptly see her and that he hoped she might be able to make it possible; but he understood from the first look at her that his promptitude was already having for her its principal reference. "I was prevented this morning, in the few minutes," he explained, "asking Mrs. Lowder if she had let you know, though I rather gathered she had; and it's what I've been in fact since then assuming. It was because I was so struck at the moment with your having, as she did tell me, so suddenly come here."

"Yes, it was sudden enough." Very neat and fine in the contracted firelight, with her hands in her lap, Kate considered what he had said. He had spoken immediately of what had happened at Sir Luke Strett's door. "She has let me know nothing. But that doesn't matter—if it's what *you* mean."

"It's part of what I mean," Densher said; but what he went on with, after a pause during which she waited, was apparently not the rest of that. "She had had her telegram from Mrs. Stringham; late last night. But to me the poor lady hasn't wired. The event," he added, "will have taken place yesterday, and Sir Luke, starting immediately, one can see, and travelling straight, will get back tomorrow morning. So that Mrs. Stringham, I judge, is left to face in some solitude the situation bequeathed to her. But of course," he wound up, "Sir Luke couldn't stay."

Her look at him might have had in it a vague betrayal of the sense that he was gaining time. "Was your telegram from Sir Luke?"

"No—I've had no telegram."

She wondered. "But not a letter—?"

"Not from Mrs. Stringham—no." He failed again however to develop this—for which her forbearance from another question gave him occasion. From whom then had he heard? He might at last, confronted with her, really have been gaining time; and as if to show that she respected this impulse she made her enquiry different. "Should you like to go out to her—to Mrs. Stringham?"

About that at least he was clear. "Not at all. She's alone, but she's very capable and very courageous. Besides—!" He had been going on, but he dropped.

"Besides," she said, "there's Eugenio? Yes, of course one remembers Eugenio."

She had uttered the words as definitely to show them for not untender; and he showed equally every reason to assent. "One remembers him indeed, and with every ground for it. He'll be of the highest value to her—he's capable of anything. What I was going to say," he went on, "is that some of their people from America must quickly arrive."

On this, as happened, Kate was able at once to satisfy him. "Mr. Someone-or-other, the person principally in charge of Milly's affairs—her first trustee, I suppose—had just got there at Mrs. Stringham's last writing."

"Ah that then was after your aunt last spoke to me—I mean the last time before this morning. I'm relieved to hear it. So," he said, "they'll do."

“Oh they’ll do.” And it came from each still as if it wasn’t what each was most thinking of. Kate presently got however a step nearer to that. “But if you had been wired to by nobody what then this morning had taken you to Sir Luke?”

“Oh something else—which I’ll presently tell you. It’s what made me instantly need to see you; it’s what I’ve come to speak to you of. But in a minute. I feel too many things,” he went on, “at seeing you in this place.” He got up as he spoke; she herself remained perfectly still. His movement had been to the fire, and, leaning a little, with his back to it, to look down on her from where he stood, he confined himself to his point. “Is it anything very bad that has brought you?”

He had now in any case said enough to justify her wish for more; so that, passing this matter by, she pressed her own challenge. “Do you mean, if I may ask, that *she,* dying—?” Her face, wondering, pressed it more than her words.

“Certainly you may ask,” he after a moment said. “What has come to me is what, as I say, I came expressly to tell you. I don’t mind letting you know,” he went on, “that my decision to do this took for me last night and this morning a great deal of thinking of. But here I am.” And he indulged in a smile that couldn’t, he was well aware, but strike her as mechanical.

She went straighter with him, she seemed to show, than he really went with her. “You didn’t want to come?”

“It would have been simple, my dear”—and he continued to smile—“if it had been, one way or the other, only a question of ‘wanting.’ It took, I admit it, the idea of what I had best do, all sorts of difficult and portentous forms. It came up for me really—well, not at all for my happiness.”

This word apparently puzzled her—she studied him in the light of it. “You look upset—you’ve certainly been tormented. You’re not well.”

“Oh—well enough!”

But she continued without heeding. “You hate what you’re doing.”

“My dear girl, you simplify”—and he was now serious enough. “It isn’t so simple even as that.”

She had the air of thinking what it then might be. “I of course can‘t, with no clue, know what it is.” She remained none the less patient and still. “If at such a moment she could write you one’s inevitably quite at sea. One doesn’t, with the best will in the world, understand.” And then as Densher had a pause which might have stood for all the involved explanation that, to his discouragement, loomed before him: “You *haven’t* decided what to do.”

She had said it very gently, almost sweetly, and he didn’t instantly say otherwise. But he said so after a look at her. “Oh yes—I have. Only with this sight of you here and what I seem to see in it for you—!” And his eyes, as at suggestions that pressed, turned from one part of the room to another.

“Horrible place, isn’t it?” said Kate.

It brought him straight back to his inquiry. “Is it for anything awful you’ve had to come?”

“Oh that will take as long to tell you as anything *you* may have. Don’t mind,” she continued, “the ‘sight of me here,’ nor whatever—which is more than I yet know myself—may be ‘in it’ for me. And kindly consider too that, after all, if you’re in trouble I can a little wish to help you. Perhaps I can absolutely even do it.”

“My dear child, it’s just because of the sense of your wish—! I suppose I’m in trouble—1 suppose that’s it. He said this with so odd a suddenness of simplicity that she could only stare for it—which he as promptly saw. So he turned off as he could his vagueness. “And yet I oughtn’t to be.” Which sounded indeed vaguer still.

She waited a moment. “Is it, as you say for my own business, anything very awful?”

“Well,” he slowly replied, “you’ll tell me if you find it so. I mean if you find my idea—”

He was so slow that she took him up. “Awful?” A sound of impatience—the form of a laugh—at last escaped her. “I can’t find it anything at all till I know what you’re talking about.”

It brought him then more to the point, though it did so at first but by making him, on the hearthrug before her, with his hands in his pockets, turn awhile to and fro. There rose in him even with this movement a recall of another time—the hour in Venice, the hour of gloom and storm, when Susan Shepherd had sat in his quarters there very much as Kate was sitting now, and he had wondered, in pain even as now, what he might say and mightn’t. Yet the present occasion after all was somehow the easier. He tried at any rate to attach that feeling to it while he stopped before his companion. “The communication I speak of can’t possibly belong—so far as its date is concerned—to these last days. The post-mark, which is legible, does; but it isn’t thinkable, for

anything else, that she wrote—!" He dropped, looking at her as if she'd understand.

It was easy to understand. "On her deathbed?" But Kate took an instant's thought. "Aren't we agreed that there was never any one in the world like her?"

"Yes." And looking over her head he spoke clearly enough. "There was never any one in the world like her."

Kate, from her chair, always without a movement, raised her eyes to the unconscious reach of his own. Then when the latter again dropped to her she added a question. "And won't it further depend a little on what the communication is?"

"A little perhaps—but not much. It's a communication," said Densher.

"Do you mean a letter?"

"Yes, a letter. Addressed to me in her hand—in hers unmistakably."

Kate thought. "Do you know her hand very well?"

"Oh perfectly."

It was as if his tone for this prompted—with a slight strangeness—her next demand. "Have you had many letters from her?"

"No. Only three notes." He spoke looking straight at her. "And very, very short ones."

"Ah," said Kate, "the number doesn't matter. Three lines would be enough if you're sure to remember."

"I'm sure I remember. Besides," Densher continued, "I've seen her hand in other ways. I seem to recall how you once, before she went to Venice, showed me one of her notes precisely *for* that. And then she once copied me something."

"Oh," said Kate almost with a smile, "I don't ask you for the detail of your reasons. One good one's enough." To which however she added as if precisely not to speak with impatience or with anything like irony: "And the writing has its usual look?"

Densher answered as if even to better that description of it. "It's beautiful."

"Yes—it *was* beautiful. Well," Kate, to defer to him still, further remarked, "it's not news to us now that she was stupendous. Anything's possible."

"Yes, anything's possible"—he appeared oddly to catch at it. "That's what I say to myself. It's what I've been believing you," he a trifle vaguely explained, "still more certain to feel."

She waited for him to say more, but he only, with his hands in his pockets, turned again away, going this time to the single window of the room, where in the absence of lamplight the blind hadn't been drawn. He looked out into the lamplit fog, lost himself in the small sordid London street—for sordid, with his other association, he felt it—as he had lost himself, with Mrs. Stringham's eyes on him, in the vista of the Grand Canal. It was present then to his recording consciousness that when he had last been driven to such an attitude the very depth of his resistance to the opportunity to give Kate away was what had so driven him. His waiting companion had on that occasion waited for him to say he *would* ; and what he had meantime glowered forth at was the inanity of such a hope. Kate's attention, on her side, during these minutes, rested on the back and shoulders he thus familiarly presented—rested as with a view of their expression, a reference to things unimparted, links still missing and that she must ever miss, try to make them out as she would. The result of her tension was that she again took him up. "You received—what you spoke of—last night?"

It made him turn round. "Coming in from Fleet Street—earlier by an hour than usual—I found it with some other letters on my table. But my eyes went straight to it, in an extraordinary way, from the door. I recognized it, knew what it was, without touching it."

"One can understand." She listened with respect. His tone however was so singular that she presently added: "You speak as if all this while you *hadn't* touched it."

"Oh yes, I've touched it. I feel as if, ever since, I'd been touching nothing else. I quite firmly," he pursued as if to be plainer, "took hold of it."

"Then where is it?"

"Oh I have it here."

"And you've brought it to show me?"

“I’ve brought it to show you.”

So he said with a distinctness that had, among his other oddities, almost a sound of cheer, yet making no movement that matched his words. She could accordingly but offer again her expectant face. while his own, to her impatience, seemed perversely to fill with another thought. “But now that you’ve done so you feel you don’t want to.”

“I want to immensely,” he said. “Only you tell me nothing.”

She smiled at him, with this, finally, as if he were an unreasonable child. “It seems to me I tell you quite as much as you tell me. You haven’t yet even told me how it is that such explanations as you require don’t come from your document itself.” Then as he answered nothing she had a flash. “You mean you haven’t read it?”

“I haven’t read it.”

She stared. “Then how am I to help you with it?”

Again leaving her while she never budged he paced five strides, and again he was before her. “By telling me *this*. It’s something, you know, that you wouldn’t tell me the other day.”

She was vague. “The other day?”

“The first time after my return—the Sunday I came to you. What’s he doing,” Densher went on, “at that hour of the morning with her? What does his having been with her there mean?”

“Of whom are you talking?”

“Of that man—Lord Mark of course. What does it represent?”

“Oh with Aunt Maud?”

“Yes, my dear—and with you. It comes more or less to the same thing; and it’s what you didn’t tell me the other day when I put you the question.”

Kate tried to remember the other day. “You asked me nothing about any hour.”

“I asked you when it was you last saw him—previous, I mean, to his second descent at Venice. You wouldn’t say, and as we were talking of a matter comparatively more important I let it pass. But the fact remains, you know, my dear, that you haven’t told me.”

Two things in this speech appeared to have reached Kate more distinctly than the others. “I ‘wouldn’t say’?—and you ‘let it pass’?” She looked just coldly blank. “You really speak as if I were keeping something back.”

“Well, you see,” Densher persisted, “you’re not even telling me now. All I want to know,” he nevertheless explained, “is whether there was a connexion between that proceeding on his part, which was practically—oh beyond all doubt!—the shock precipitating for her what has now happened, and anything that had occurred with him previously for yourself. How in the world did he know we’re engaged?”

—V—

Kate slowly rose; it was, since she had lighted the candles and sat down, the first movement she had made. “Are you trying to fix it on me that I must have told him?”

She spoke not so much in resentment as in pale dismay—which he showed he immediately took in. “My dear child, I’m not trying to ‘fix’ anything; but I’m extremely tormented and I seem not to understand. What has the brute to do with us anyway?”

“What has he indeed?” Kate asked.

She shook her head as if in recovery, within the minute, of some mild allowance for his unreason. There was in it—and for his reason really—one of those half-inconsequent sweetnesses by which she had often before made, over some point of difference, her own terms with him. Practically she was making them now, and essentially he was knowing it; yet inevitably, all the same, he was accepting it. She stood there close to him, with something in her patience that suggested her having supposed, when he spoke more appealingly, that he was going to kiss her. He hadn’t been, it appeared; but his continued appeal was none the less the quieter. “What’s he doing, from ten o’clock on Christmas morning, with Mrs. Lowder?”

Kate looked surprised. “Didn’t she tell you he’s staying there?”

“At Lancaster Gate?” Densher’s surprise met it. “ ‘Staying’?—since when?”

“Since day before yesterday. He was there before I came away.” And then she explained—confessing it in fact anomalous. “It’s an accident—like Aunt Maud’s having herself remained in town for Christmas, but it isn’t after all so monstrous. We stayed—and, with my having come here, she’s sorry now—because we neither of us, waiting from day to day for the news you brought, seemed to want to be with a lot of people.”

“You stayed for thinking of—Venice?”

“Of course we did. For what else? And even a little,” Kate wonderfully added—“it’s true at least of Aunt Maud—for thinking of you.”

He appreciated. “I see. Nice of you every way. But whom,” he inquired, “has Lord Mark stayed for thinking of?”

“His being in London, I believe, is a very commonplace matter. He has some rooms which he has had suddenly some rather advantageous chance to let—such as, with his confessed, his decidedly proclaimed want of money, he hasn’t had it in him, in spite of everything, not to jump at.”

Densher’s attention was entire. “In spite of everything? In spite of what?”

“Well, I don’t know. In spite, say, of his being scarcely supposed to do that sort of thing.”

“To try to get money?”

“To try at any rate in little thrifty ways. Apparently however he has had for some reason to do what he can. He turned at a couple of days’ notice out of his place, making it over to his tenant; and Aunt Maud, who’s deeply in his confidence about all such matters, said: ‘Come then to Lancaster Gate—to sleep at least—till, like all the world, you go to the country.’ He was to have gone to the country—I think to Matcham—yesterday afternoon: Aunt Maud, that is, told me he was.”

Kate had been somehow, for her companion, through this statement, beautifully, quite soothingly, suggestive. “Told you, you mean, so that you needn’t leave the house?”

“Yes—so far as she had taken it into her head that his being there was part of my reason.”

“And was it part of your reason?”

“A little if you like. Yet there’s plenty here—as I knew there would be—without it. So that,” she said candidly, “doesn’t matter. I’m glad I am here: even if for all the good I do—!” She implied however that that didn’t matter either. “He didn’t, as you tell me, get off then to Matcham; though he may possibly if it *is* possible, be going this afternoon. But what strikes me as most probable—and it’s really, I’m bound to say, quite amiable of him—is that he has declined to leave Aunt Maud, as I’ve been so ready to do, to spend her Christmas alone. If moreover he has given up Matcham for her it’s a *procéde* [bj] that won’t please her less. It’s small wonder therefore that she insists, on a dull day, in driving him about. I don’t pretend to know,” she wound up, “what may happen between them; but that’s all I see in it.”

“You see in everything, and you always did,” Densher returned, “something that, while I’m with you at least, I always take from you as the truth itself.”

She looked at him as if consciously and even carefully extracting the sting of his reservation; then she spoke with a quiet gravity that seemed to show how fine she found it. “Thank you.” It had for him, like everything else, its effect. They were still closely face to face, and, yielding to the impulse to which he hadn’t yielded just before, he laid his hands on her shoulders, held her hard a minute and shook her a little, far from untenderly, as if in expression of more mingled things, all difficult, than he could speak. Then bending his head he applied his lips to her cheek. He fell, after this, away for an instant, resuming his unrest, while she kept the position in which, all passive and as a statue, she had taken his demonstration. It didn’t prevent her, however, from offering him, as if what she had had was enough for the moment, a further indulgence. She made a quiet lucid connexion and as she made it sat down again. “I’ve been trying to place exactly, as to its date, something that did happen to me while you were in Venice. I mean a talk with him. He spoke to me—spoke out.”

“Ah there you are!” said Densher who had wheeled round.

“Well, if I’m ‘there,’ as you so gracefully call it, by having refused to meet him as he wanted—as he pressed—I plead guilty to being so. Would you have liked me,” she went on, “to give him an answer that would have kept him from going?”

It made him a little awkwardly think. “Did you know he was going?”

“Never for a moment; but I’m afraid that—even if it doesn’t fit your strange suppositions—1 should have

given him just the same answer if I had known. If it's a matter I haven't, since your return, thrust upon you, that's simply because it's not a matter in the memory of which I find a particular joy. I hope that if I've satisfied you about it," she continued, "it's not too much to ask of you to let it rest."

"Certainly," said Densher kindly, "I'll let it rest." But the next moment he pursued: "He saw something. He guessed."

"If you mean," she presently returned, "that he was unfortunately the one person we hadn't deceived, I can't contradict you."

"No—of course not. But *why,"* Densher still risked, "was he unfortunately the one person—? He's not really a bit intelligent."

"Intelligent enough apparently to have seen a mystery, a riddle, in anything so unnatural as—all things considered and when it came to the point—my attitude. So he gouged out his conviction, and on his conviction he acted."

Densher seemed for a little to look at Lord Mark's conviction as if it were a blot on the face of nature. "Do you mean because you had appeared to him to have encouraged him?"

"Of course I had been decent to him. Otherwise where were we?"

" 'Where'—?"

"You and I. What I appeared to him, however, hadn't mattered. What mattered was how I appeared to Aunt Maud. Besides, you must remember that he has had all along his impression of you. You can't help it," she said, "but you're after all—well, yourself."

"As much myself as you please. But when I took myself to Venice and kept myself there—what," Densher asked, "did he make of that?"

"Your being in Venice and liking to be—which is never on any one's part a monstrosity—was explicable for him in other ways. He was quite capable moreover of seeing it as dissimulation."

"In spite of Mrs. Lowder?"

"No," said Kate, "not in spite of Mrs. Lowder now. Aunt Maud, before what you call his second descent, hadn't convinced him—all the more that my refusal of him didn't help. But he came back convinced." And then as her companion still showed a face at a loss: "I mean after he had seen Milly, spoken to her and left her. Milly convinced him."

"Milly?" Densher again but vaguely echoed.

"That you were sincere. That it was *her* you loved." It came to him from her in such a way that he instantly, once more, turned, found himself yet again at his window. "Aunt Maud, on his return here," she meanwhile continued, "had it from him. And that's why you're now so well with Aunt Maud."

He only for a minute looked out in silence—after which he came away. "And why you are." It was almost, in its extremely affirmative effect between them, the note of recrimination; or it would have been perhaps rather if it hadn't been so much more the note of truth. It was sharp because it was true, but its truth appeared to impose it as an argument so conclusive as to permit on neither side a sequel. That made, while they faced each other over it without speech, the gravity of everything. It was as if there were almost danger, which the wrong word might start. Densher accordingly at last acted to better purpose: he drew, standing there before her, a pocket-book from the breast of his waistcoat and he drew from the pocket-book a folded letter to which her eyes attached themselves. He restored then the receptacle to its place and, with a movement not the less odd for being visibly instinctive and unconscious, carried the hand containing his letter behind him. What he thus finally spoke of was a different matter. "Did I understand from Mrs. Lowder that your father's in the house?"

If it never had taken her long in such excursions to meet him it was not to take her so now. "In the house, yes. But we needn't fear his interruption" —she spoke as if he had thought of that. "He's in bed."

"Do you mean with illness?"

She sadly shook her head. "Father's never ill. He's a marvel. He's only—endless."

Densher thought. "Can I in any way help you with him?"

"Yes." She perfectly, wearily, almost serenely, had it all. "By our making your visit as little of an affair as possible for him—and for Marian too."

"I see. They hate so your seeing me. Yet I couldn't—could I?—not have come."

“No, you couldn’t not have come.”

“But I can only, on the other hand, go as soon as possible?”

Quickly it almost upset her. “Ah don’t, to-day, put ugly words into my mouth. I’ve enough of my trouble without it.”

“I know—I know!” He spoke in instant pleading. “It’s all only that I’m as troubled *for* you. When did he come?”

“Three days ago—after he hadn’t been near her for more than a year, after he had apparently, and not regrettably, ceased to remember her existence; and in a state which made it impossible not to take him in.”

Densher hesitated. “Do you mean in such want—?”

“No, not of food, of necessary things—not even, so far as his appearance went, of money. He looked as wonderful as ever. But he was—well, in terror.”

“In terror of what?”

“I don’t know. Of somebody—of something. He wants, he says, to be quiet. But his quietness is awful.”

She suffered, but he couldn’t not question. “What does he do?”

It made Kate herself hesitate. “He cries.”

Again for a moment he hung fire, but he risked it. “What *has* he done?”

It made her slowly rise, and they were once more fully face to face. Her eyes held his own and she was paler than she had been. “If you love me—now—don’t ask me about father.”

He waited again a moment. “I love you. It’s because I love you that I’m here. It’s because I love you that I’ve brought you this.” And he drew from behind him the letter that had remained in his hand.

But her eyes only—though he held it out—met the offer. “Why you’ve not broken the seal!”

“If I had broken the seal—exactly—I should know what’s within. It’s for *you* to break the seal that I bring it.”

She looked—still not touching the thing—inordinately grave. “To break the seal of something to you from *her?”*

“Ah precisely because it’s from her. I’ll abide by whatever you think of it.”

“I don’t understand,” said Kate. “What do you yourself think?” And then as he didn’t answer: “It seems to me I think you know. You have your instinct. You don’t need to read. It’s the proof.”

Densher faced her words as if they had been an accusation, an accusation for which he was prepared and which there was but one way to face. “I have indeed my instinct. It came to me, while I worried it out, last night. It came to me as an effect of the hour.” He held up his letter and seemed now to insist more than to confess. “This thing had been timed.”

“For Christmas Eve?”

“For Christmas Eve.”

Kate had suddenly a strange smile. “The season of gifts!” After which, as he said nothing, she went on: “And had been written, you mean, while she could write, and kept to *be* so timed?”

Only meeting her eyes while he thought, he again didn’t reply. “What do you mean by the proof?”

“Why of the beauty with which you’ve been loved. But I won’t,” she said, “break your seal.”

“You positively decline?”

“Positively. Never.” To which she added oddly: “I know without.”

He had another pause. “And what is it you know?”

“That she announces to you she has made you rich.”

His pause this time was longer. “Left me her fortune?”

“Not all of it, no doubt, for it’s immense. But money to a large amount. I don’t care,” Kate went on, “to know how much.” And her strange smile recurred. “I trust her.”

“Did she tell you?” Densher asked.

“Never!” Kate visibly flushed at the thought. “That wouldn’t, on my part, have been playing fair with her. And I did,” she added, “play fair.”

Densher, who had believed her—he couldn’t help it—continued, holding his letter, to face her. He was much quieter now, as if his torment had somehow passed. “You played fair with me, Kate; and that’s why—since we talk of proofs—I want to give you one. I’ve wanted to let you see—and in preference even to myself—something I feel as sacred.”

She frowned a little. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ve asked myself for a tribute, for a sacrifice by which I can peculiarly recognize—”

“Peculiarly recognize what?” she demanded as he dropped.

“The admirable nature of your own sacrifice. You were capable in Venice of an act of splendid generosity.”

“And the privilege you offer me with that document is my reward?”

He made a movement. “It’s all I can do as a symbol of my attitude.”

She looked at him long. “Your attitude, my dear, is that you’re afraid of yourself. You’ve had to take yourself in hand. You’ve had to do yourself violence.”

“So it is then you meet me?”

She bent her eyes hard a moment to the letter, from which her hand still stayed itself. “You absolutely *desire* me to take it?”

“I absolutely desire you to take it.”

“To do what I like with it?”

“Short of course of making known its terms. It must remain—pardon my making the point—between you and me.”

She had a last hesitation, but she presently broke it. “Trust me.” Taking from him the sacred script she held it a little while her eyes again rested on those fine characters of Milly’s that they had shortly before discussed. “To hold it,” she brought out, “is to know.”

“Oh I *know!”* said Merton Densher.

“Well then if we both do—!” She had already turned to the fire, nearer to which she had moved, and with a quick gesture had jerked the thing into the flame. He started—but only half—as to undo her action: his arrest was as prompt as the latter had been decisive. He only watched, with her, the paper burn; after which their eyes again met. “You’ll have it all,” Kate said, “from New York.”

—VI—

It was after he had in fact, two months later, heard from New York that she paid him a visit one morning at his own quarters—coming not as she had come in Venice, under his extreme solicitation, but as a need recognized in the first instance by herself, even though also as the prompt result of a missive delivered to her. This had consisted of a note from Densher accompanying a letter, “just to hand,” addressed him by an eminent American legal firm, a firm of whose high character he had become conscious while in New York as of a thing in the air itself, and whose head and front, the principal executor of Milly Theale’s copious will, had been duly identified at Lancaster Gate as the gentleman hurrying out, by the straight southern course, before the girl’s death, to the support of Mrs. Stringham. Densher’s act on receipt of the document in question—an act as to which and to the bearings of which his resolve had had time to mature—constituted in strictness, singularly enough, the first reference to Milly, or to what Milly might or might not have done, that had passed between our pair since they had stood together watching the destruction, in the little vulgar grate at Chelsea, of the undisclosed work of her hand. They had at the time, and in due deference now, on his part, to Kate’s mention of her responsibility for his call, immediately separated, and when they met again the subject was made present to them—at all events till some flare of new light—only by the intensity with which it mutely expressed its absence. They were not moreover in these weeks to meet often, in spite of the fact that this had, during January and a part of February, actually become for them a comparatively easy matter. Kate’s stay at Mrs. Condrip’s prolonged itself under allowances from her aunt which would have been a mystery to Densher

had he not been admitted, at Lancaster Gate, really in spite of himself, to the esoteric view of them. “It’s her idea,” Mrs. Lowder had there said to him as if she really despised ideas—which she didn’t; “and I’ve taken up with my own, which is to give her her head till she has had enough of it. She *has* had enough of it, she had that soon enough; but as she’s as proud as the deuce she’ll come back when she has found some reason—having nothing in common with her disgust—of which she can make a show. She calls it her holiday to which, once a year or so, as she says, the very maids in the scullery have a right. So we’re taking it on that basis. But we shall not soon, I think, take another of the same sort. Besides, she’s quite decent; she comes often—whenever I make her a sign; and she has been good, on the whole, this year or two, so that, to be decent myself, I don’t complain. She has really been, poor dear, very much what one hoped; though I needn’t, you know,” Aunt Maud wound up, “tell you, after all, you clever creature, what that was.”

It had been partly in truth to keep down the opportunity for this that Densher’s appearances under the good lady’s roof markedly, after Christmas, interspaced themselves. The phase of his situation that on his return from Venice had made them for a short time almost frequent was at present quite obscured, and with it the impulse that had then acted. Another phase had taken its place, which he would have been painfully at a loss as yet to name or otherwise set on its feet, but of which the steadily rising tide left Mrs. Lowder, for his desire, quite high and dry. There had been a moment when it seemed possible that Mrs. Stringham, returning to America under convoy, would pause in London on her way and be housed with her old friend; in which case he was prepared for some apparent zeal of attendance. But this danger passed—he had felt it a danger, and the person in the world whom he would just now have most valued seeing on his own terms sailed away westward from Genoa. He thereby only wrote to her, having broken, in this respect, after Milly’s death, the silence as to the sense of which, before that event, their agreement had been so deep. She had answered him from Venice twice, and had had time to answer him twice again from New York. The last letter of her four had come by the same post as the document he sent on to Kate, but he hadn’t gone into the question of also enclosing that. His correspondence with Milly’s companion was somehow already presenting itself to him as a feature—as a factor, he would have said in his newspaper—of the time whatever it might be, long or short, in store for him; but one of his acutest current thoughts was apt to be devoted to his not having yet mentioned it to Kate. She had put him no question, no “Don’t you ever hear?”—so that he hadn’t been brought to the point. This he described to himself as a mercy, for he liked his secret. It was as a secret that, in the same personal privacy, he described his transatlantic commerce, scarce even wincing while he recognized it as the one connexion in which he wasn’t straight. He had in fact for this connexion a vivid mental image—he saw it as a small emergent rock in the waste of waters, the bottomless grey expanse of straightness. The fact that he had on several recent occasions taken with Kate an out-of-the-way walk that was each time to define itself as more remarkable for what they didn’t say than for what they did—this fact failed somehow to mitigate for him a strange consciousness of exposure. There was something deep within him that he had absolutely shown to no one—to the companion of these walks in particular not a bit more than he could help; but he was none the less haunted, under its shadow, with a dire apprehension of publicity. It was as if he had invoked that ugliness in some stupid good faith; and it was queer enough that on his emergent rock, clinging to it and to Susan Shepherd, he should figure himself as hidden from view. That represented no doubt his belief in her power, or in her delicate disposition to protect him. Only Kate at all events knew—what Kate did know, and she was also the last person interested to tell it; in spite of which it was as if his *act,* so deeply associated with her and never to be recalled nor recovered, was abroad on the winds of the world. His honesty, as he viewed it with Kate, was the very element of that menace: to the degree that he saw at moments, as to their final impulse or their final remedy, the need to bury in the dark blindness of each other’s arms the knowledge of each other that they couldn’t undo.

Save indeed that the sense in which it was in these days a question of arms was limited, this might have been the intimate expedient to which they were actually resorting. It had its value, in conditions that made everything count, that thrice over, in Battersea Park—where Mrs. Lowder now never drove—he had adopted the usual means, in sequestered alleys, of holding her close to his side. She could make absences, on her present footing, without having too inordinately to account for them at home—which was exactly what gave them for the first time an appreciable margin. He supposed she could always say in Chelsea—though he didn’t press it—that she had been across the town, in decency, for a look at her aunt; whereas there had always been reasons at Lancaster Gate for her not being able to plead the look at her other relatives. It was therefore between them a freedom of a purity as yet untasted; which for that matter also they made in various ways no little show of cherishing as such. They made the show indeed in every way but the way of a large use—an inconsequence that they almost equally gave time to helping each other to regard as natural. He put it to his companion that the kind of favor he now enjoyed at Lancaster Gate, the wonderful warmth of his reception there, cut in a manner the ground from under their feet. He was too horribly trusted—they had succeeded too well. He couldn’t in short make appointments with her without abusing Aunt Maud, and he couldn’t on the other hand haunt that lady without tying his hands. Kate saw what he meant just as he saw what she did when she admitted that she was herself, to a degree scarce less embarrassing, in the enjoyment of Aunt Maud’s confidence. It was special at present—she was handsomely used; she confessed accordingly to a

scruple about misapplying her license. Mrs. Lowder then finally had found—and all unconsciously now—the way to baffle them. It wasn't however that they didn't meet a little, none the less, in the southern quarter, to point for their common benefit the moral of their defeat. They crossed the river; they wandered in neighborhoods sordid and safe; the winter was mild, so that, mounting to the top of trams, they could rumble together to Clapham or to Greenwich. If at the same time their minutes had never been so counted it struck Densher that by a singular law their tone—he scarce knew what to call it—had never been so bland. Not to talk of what they *might* have talked of drove them to other ground; it was as if they used a perverse insistence to make up what they ignored. They concealed their pursuit of the irrelevant by the charm of their manner; they took precautions for the courtesy they had formerly left to come of itself; often, when he had quitted her, he stopped short, walking off, with the aftersense of their change. He would have described their change—had he so far faced it as to describe it—by their being so damned civil. That had even, with the intimate, the familiar at the point to which they had brought them, a touch almost of the droll. What danger had there ever been of their becoming rude—after each had long since made the other so tremendously tender? Such were the things he asked himself when he wondered what in particular he most feared.

Yet all the while too the tension had its charm—such being the interest of a creature who could bring one back to her by such different roads. It was her talent for life again; which found in her a difference for the differing time. She didn't give their tradition up; she but made of it something new. Frankly moreover she had never been more agreeable nor in a way—to put it prosaically—better company: he felt almost as if he were knowing her on that defined basis—which he even hesitated whether to measure as reduced or as extended; as if at all events he were admiring her as she was probably admired by people she met "out." He hadn't in fine reckoned that she would still have something fresh for him; yet this was what she had—that on the top of a tram in the Borough he felt as if he were next her at dinner. What a person she would be if they *had* been rich—with what a genius for the so-called great life, what a presence for the so-called great house, what a grace for the so-called great positions! He might regret at once, while he was about it, that they weren't princes or billionaires. She had treated him on their Christmas to a softness that had struck him at the time as of the quality of fine velvet, meant to fold thick, but stretched a little thin; at present, however, she gave him the impression of a contact multitudinous as only the superficial can be. She had throughout never a word for what went on at home. She came out of that and she returned to it, but her nearest reference was the look with which, each time, she bade him good-bye. The look was her repeated prohibition: "It's what I have to see and to know—so don't touch it. That but wakes up the old evil, which I keep still, in my way, by sitting by it. I go now—leave me alone! -to sit by it again. The way to pity me—if that's what you want—is to believe in me. If we could really *do* anything it would be another matter."

He watched her, when she went her way, with the vision of what she thus a little stiffly carried. It was confused and obscure, but how, with her head high, it made her hold herself! He really in his own person might at these moments have been swaying a little aloft as one of the objects in her poised basket. It was doubtless thanks to some such consciousness as this that he felt the lapse of the weeks, before the day of Kate's mounting of his stair, almost swingingly rapid. They contained for him the contradiction that, whereas periods of waiting are supposed in general to keep the time slow, it was the wait, actually, that made the pace trouble him. The secret of that anomaly, to be plain, was that he was aware of how, while the days melted, something rare went with them.

This something was only a thought, but a thought precisely of such freshness and such delicacy as made the precious, of whatever sort, most subject to the hunger of time. The thought was all his own, and his intimate companion was the last person he might have shared it with. He kept it back like a favorite pang; left it behind him, so to say, when he went out, but came home again the sooner for the certainty of finding it there. Then he took it out of its sacred corner and its soft wrappings; he undid them one by one, handling them, handling *it,* as a father, baffled and tender, might handle a maimed child. But so it was before him—in his dread of who else might see it. Then he took to himself at such hours, in other words, that he should never, never know what had been in Milly's letter. The intention announced in it he should but too probably know; only that would have been, but for the depths of his spirit, the least part of it. The part of it missed for ever was the turn she would have given her act. This turn had possibilities that, somehow, by wondering about them, his imagination had extraordinarily filled out and refined. It had made of them a revelation the loss of which was like the sight of a priceless pearl cast before his eyes—his pledge given not to save it—into the fathomless sea, or rather even it was like the sacrifice of something sentient and throbbing, something that, for the spiritual ear, might have been audible as a faint far wail. This was the sound he cherished when alone in the stillness of his rooms. He sought and guarded the stillness, so that it might prevail there till the inevitable sounds of life, once more, comparatively coarse and harsh, should smother and deaden it—doubtless by the same process with which they would officiously heal the ache in his soul that was somehow one with it. It moreover deepened the sacred hush that he couldn't complain. He had given poor Kate her freedom.

The great and obvious thing, as soon as she stood there on the occasion we have already named, was that

she was now in high possession of it. This would have marked immediately the difference—had there been nothing else to do it—between their actual terms and their other terms, the character of their last encounter in Venice. That had been *his* idea, whereas her present step was her own; the few marks they had in common were, from the first moment, to his conscious vision, almost pathetically plain. She was as grave now as before; she looked around her, to hide it, as before; she pretended, as before, in an air in which her words at the moment itself fell flat, to an interest in the place and a curiosity about his "things"; there was a recall in the way in which, after she had failed a little to push up her veil symmetrically and he had said she had better take it off altogether, she had acceded to his suggestion before the glass. It was just these things that were vain; and what was real was that his fancy figured her after the first few minutes as literally now providing the element of reassurance which had previously been his care. It was she, supremely, who had the presence of mind. She made indeed for that matter very prompt use of it. "You see I've not hesitated this time to break your seal."

She had laid on the table from the moment of her coming in the long envelope, substantially filled, which he had sent her enclosed in another of still ampler make. He had however not looked at it—his belief being that he wished never again to do so; besides which it had happened to rest with its addressed side up. So he "saw" nothing, and it was only into her eyes that her remark made him look, declining any approach to the object indicated. "It's not 'my' seal, my dear; and my intention—which my note tried to express—was all to treat it to you as not mine."

"Do you mean that it's to that extent mine then?"

"Well, let us call it if we like, theirs—that of the good people in New York, the authors of our communication. If the seal is broken well and good; but we *might,* you know," he presently added, "have sent it back to them intact and inviolate. Only accompanied," he smiled with his heart in his mouth, "by an absolutely kind letter."

Kate took it with the mere brave blink with which a patient of courage signifies to the exploring medical hand that the tender place is touched. He saw on the spot that she was prepared, and with this signal sign that she was too intelligent not to be, came a flicker of possibilities. She was—merely to put it at that—intelligent enough for anything. "Is it what you're proposing we should do?"

"Ah it's too late to do it—well, ideally. Now, with that sign that we *know*—!"

"But you don't know," she said very gently.

"I refer," he went on without noticing it, "to what would have been the handsome way. Its being dispatched again, with no cognisance taken but one's assurance of the highest consideration, and the proof of this in the state of the envelope—*that* would have been really satisfying."

She thought an instant. "The state of the envelope proving refusal, you mean, not to be based on the insufficiency of the sum?"

Densher smiled again as for the play, however whimsical, of her humour. "Well yes—something of that sort."

"So that if cognisance *has* been taken—so far as I'm concerned—it spoils the beauty?"

"It makes the difference that I'm disappointed in the hope—which I confess I entertained—that you'd bring the thing back to me as you had received it."

"You didn't express that hope in your letter."

"I didn't want to. I wanted to leave it to yourself. I wanted—oh yes, if that's what you wish to ask me—to see what you'd do."

"You wanted to measure the possibilities of my departure from delicacy?"

He continued steady now; a kind of ease—from the presence, as in the air, of something he couldn't yet have named—had come to him. "Well, I wanted—in so good a case—to test you."

She was struck—it showed in her face—by his expression. "It is a good case. I doubt whether a better," she said with her eyes on him, "has ever been known."

"The better the case then the better the test!"

"How do you know," she asked in reply to this, "what I'm capable of?"

"I don't, my dear! Only with the seal unbroken I should have known sooner."

"I see"—she took it in. "But I myself shouldn't have known at all. And you wouldn't have known, either,

what I do know."

"Let me tell you at once," he returned, "that if you've been moved to correct my ignorance I very particularly request you not to."

She just hesitated. "Are you afraid of the effect of the corrections ? Can you only do it by doing it blindly?"

He waited a moment. "What is it that you speak of my doing?"

"Why the only thing in the world that I take you as thinking of. Not accepting—what she has done. Isn't there some regular name in such cases? Not taking up the bequest."

"There's something you forget in it," he said after a moment. "My asking you to join with me in doing so."

Her wonder but made her softer, yet at the same time didn't make her less firm. "How can I 'join' in a matter with which I've nothing to do?"

"How? By a single word."

"And what word?"

"Your consent to my giving up."

"My consent has no meaning when I can't prevent you."

"You can perfectly prevent me. Understand that well," he said.

She seemed to face a threat in it. "You mean you won't give up if I don't consent?"

"Yes. I do nothing."

"That, as I understand, is accepting."

Densher paused. "I do nothing formal."

"You won't, I suppose you mean, touch the money."

"I won't touch the money."

It had a sound—though he had been coming to it—that made for gravity. "Who then in such an event will?"

"Any one who wants or who can."

Again a little she said nothing: she might say too much. But by the time she spoke he had covered ground. "How can I touch it but *through* you?"

"You can't. Any more," he added, "then I can renounce it except through you."

"Oh ever so much less! There's nothing," she explained, "in my power."

"I'm in your power," Merton Densher said.

"In what way?"

"In the way I show—and the way I've always shown. When have I shown," he asked as with a sudden cold impatience, "anything else? You surely must feel—so that you needn't wish to appear to spare me in it—how you 'have' me."

"It's very good of you, my dear," she nervously laughed, "to put me so thoroughly up to it!"

"I put you up to nothing. I didn't even put you up to the chance that, as I said a few moments ago, I saw for you in forwarding that thing. Your liberty is therefore in every way complete."

It had come to the point really that they showed each other pale faces, and that all the unspoken between them looked out of their eyes in a dim terror of their further conflict. Something even rose between them in one of their short silences- something that was like an appeal from each to the other not to be too true. Their necessity was somehow before them, but which of them must meet it first? "Thank you!" Kate said for his word about her freedom, but taking for the minute no further action on it. It was blest at least that all ironies failed them, and during another slow moment their very sense of it cleared the air.

There was an effect of this in the way he soon went on. "You must intensely feel that it's the thing for which we worked together."

She took up the remark, however, no more than if it were commonplace ; she was already again occupied

with a point of her own. “Is it absolutely true—for if it is, you know, it’s tremendously interesting- that you haven’t so much as a curiosity about what she has done for you?”

“Would you like,” he asked, “my formal oath on it?”

“No—but I don’t understand. It seems to me in your place—!”

“Ah,” he couldn’t help breaking in, “what do you know of my place? Pardon me,” he at once added; “my preference is the one I express.

She had in an instant nevertheless a curious thought. “But won’t the facts be published.”

“‘Published’?”—he winced

“I mean won’t you see them in the papers?”

“Ah never! I shall know how to escape that.”

It seemed to settle the subject, but she had the next minute another insistence. “Your desire is to escape everything?”

“Everything.”

“And do you need no more definite sense of what it is you ask me to help you to renounce?”

“My sense is sufficient without being definite. I’m willing to believe that the amount of money’s not small.”

“Ah there you are!” she exclaimed.

“If she was to leave me a remembrance,” he quietly pursued, “it would inevitably not be meagre.”

Kate waited as for how to say it. “It’s worthy of her. It’s what she was herself—if you remember what we once said *that* was.”

He hesitated-as if there had been many things. But he remembered one of them. “Stupendous?”

“Stupendous.” A faint smile for it—ever so small—had flickered in her face, but had vanished before the omen of tears, a little less uncertain, had shown themselves in his own. His eyes filled—but that made her continue. She continued gently. “I think that what it really is must be that you’re afraid. I mean,” she explained, “that you’re afraid of *all* the truth. If you’re in love with her without it, what indeed can you be more? And you’re afraid—it’s wonderful! —to be in love with her.”

“I never was in love with her,” said Densher.

She took it, but after a little she met it. “I believe that now—for the time she lived. I believe it at least for the time you were there. But your change came—as it might well—the day you last saw her; she died for you then that you might understand her. From that hour you did.” With which Kate slowly rose. “And I do now. She did it *for us.”* Densher rose to face her, and she went on with her thought. “I used to call her, in my stupidity—for want of anything better—a dove. Well she stretched out her wings, and it was to *that* they reached. They cover us.”

“They cover us,” Densher said.

“That’s what I give you,” Kate gravely wound up. “That’s what I’ve done for you.”

His look at her had a slow strangeness that had dried on the moment, his tears. “Do I understand then—?”

“That I do consent?” She gravely shook her head. “No—for I see. You’ll marry me without the money; you won’t marry me with it. If I don’t consent *you* don’t.”

“You lose me?” He showed, though naming it frankly, a sort of awe of her high grasp. “Well, you lose nothing else. I make over to you every penny.”

Prompt was his own clearness, but she had no smile this time to spare. “Precisely—so that I must choose.”

“You must choose.”

Strange it was for him then that she stood in his own rooms doing it, while, with an intensity now beyond any that had ever made his breath come slow, he waited for her act. “There’s but one thing that can save you from my choice.”

“From your choice of my surrender to you?”

“Yes”—and she gave a nod at the long envelope on the table—“your surrender of that.”

“What is it then?”

“Your word of honour that you’re not in love with her memory.”

“Oh—her memory!”

“Ah”—she made a high gesture—“don’t speak of it as if you couldn’t be. I could in your place; and you’re one for whom it will do. Her memory’s your love. You want no other.”

He heard her out in stillness, watching her face but not moving. Then he only said: “I’ll marry you, mind you, in an hour.”

“As we were?”

“As we were. ”

But she turned to the door, and her headshake was now the end. “We shall never be again as we were!”

THE END

Endnotes

1 (p. 3) *Long had I turned it over ... seeing the theme as formidable:* Henry James is writing the preface in 1909, years after he first sketched out his ideas for the story in his notebooks (1894), and after the actual writing of the novel (1901-1902). In *The Ambassadors,* he worked from a lengthy and very detailed outline that he had submitted to his publishers; this outline survives, and is now in the Widener Library at Harvard University. James prepared a similar but shorter and less detailed outline for *Wings* at some point and submitted it to his publishers, but it has been lost.

2 (p. 4) *the poet essentially can't be concerned with the act of dying.... it is still by the act of living that [the sick] appeal to him, and appeal the more as the conditions plot against them and prescribe the battle:* This is as clear a statement as one finds in the novel summing up James's negative attitude toward the death scene of the nineteenth-century novelistic tradition. Characters in James's novels are not depicted on a death bed, surrounded by mourning relatives and gasping out final words. Death is more of a disappearance. Characters die offstage and out of sight, and the focus is on the impact of the death on the living.

3 (p. 13) *There is no economy of treatment without an adopted, a related point of view:* James's conception of the well-made novel stressed the importance of the point of view from which the story is told or narrated, an idea that has been influential in modern literary criticism. See R. P. Blackmur, "Introduction," in James's *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces,* pp. vii-xxxix (see "For Further Reading").

4 (p. 33) *He put the question with a charming air of sudden spiritual heat.... "what's called in the business world, I believe, an 'asset' "*: James seems to have originally projected a larger role for Lionel Croy in the story, but Croy disappears after book first. Croy's comments on the business world, as well as subsequent references by Lord Mark, display a hostility to all things commercial that was probably close to what James himself felt. James never had much direct experience with or knowledge of industry and commerce, but he was keenly aware of the business details of publishing. He did not like the tendencies that were evident even in his own time for publishers to push the popular "blockbuster" over serious fiction. Some of these issues are explored in James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet" (1896); see Peter Rawlings, ed., *Henry james' Shorter Masterpieces,* vol. 2, pp. 46-88.

5 (p. 53) *the present winter's end:* James does not tell us exactly when the novel takes place. We infer that it is set at the end of the Victorian era—around the turn of the century. The 1997 lain Softley movie version of *The Wings of the Dove* assigns a later date (1910), perhaps to bring the setting closer to World War I and heighten the sense of foreboding that hovers over the action.

6 (p. 55) *all the high dim things she lumped together as of the mind:* James does not tell us in detail what education Kate Croy has received. We learn that she has attended schools on the Continent and has become attracted to all things foreign. In post-Victorian England, women were not yet "in business" or in "the professions." While young Victorian women of any social standing usually received enough education to become governesses if they were not able to marry, the general intent was to have one's daughters exposed to art, music, and modern languages with a view to finding a desirable partner in marriage. Kate Croy felt shortchanged in the life of the mind and was attracted to Densher in part because he filled this need. His eclectic knowledge, along with his schooling on the continent, impressed her deeply.

7 (p. 72) *he asked himself what was to be expected of a person who could treat one like that:* This passage and the several long paragraphs that follow are good examples of how James enters into the minds of his protagonists and reveals to us what they are thinking. Nothing much is actually happening here. Densher is waiting and is pacing the room. But his mind wanders as he ponders his situation. James summarizes and paraphrases Densher's thoughts, a literary device that critics refer to as "the first person attached" point of view. James does this more with Densher, who is a reflective and intellectual type, and with Milly Theale, whose consciousness is more important to us than her frail body, than he does with Kate Croy. We get to know Kate more by what she says and does or by a look or gesture, a shake of the head, than by James telling us what she is thinking. Kate is a less cerebral and a more forceful person than Densher, so the device of exploring her thoughts is less necessary.

8 (p. 100) *we shall really ourselves scarce otherwise come closer to her than by feeling their impression and sharing, if need be, their confusion* : James's use of this expression and his reference a few sentences later to "our young woman" illustrate the way in which he departs occasionally from the use of the unseen omniscient author and appears to inject himself into the narrative. He "shares" the confusion of the characters and "feels" their impressions.

9 (p. 105) *I hasten to add:* Although James's narrator uses the personal pronoun "I" here, he never becomes an actual character in the story. Joseph Conrad in his short story *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897) employs a similar device. The omniscient narrator knows all; he is, in fact, on board the *Narcissus* when it capsizes. But the narrator never actually appears in the story. His apparently invisible presence on-board becomes known to us only when he tells us at the end of the story that he was so frightened he will never again go to sea.

10 (p. 138) of *Thackerayan character:* Kate presumably reminds Mrs. Stringham a little of Becky Sharp, the captivating but unscrupulous heroine of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848).

11 (p. 150) *but it was clear Mrs. Condrip was ... in quite another geography:* This is a good illustration of Milly's increasing sophistication and awareness of the complexities she is encountering in London. Book fourth in its entirety is an example of the growth of Milly's consciousness. She understands that she is in a "labyrinth," that she teeters on the edge of an "abyss." She revels in it, however, even though she is frightened, because this is what she understands as being more fully aware and more truly alive. She is not interested in tourism but in people and in the complexity of social circumstance.

12 (p. 169) *"but mine's several shades greener":* This scene is one of a number of memorable passages in the very rich and complex fifth book. Milly is here trying to make light of the emotional experience she has just undergone in viewing the Bronzino portrait that resembles her. She has had intimations of mortality; she feels that she will be, like the lady in the portrait, "dead, dead, dead." Critics and literary scholars have seen Milly's reaction as a critical turning point, a sign that she can no longer keep up a brave front.

13 (p. 177) *"I shan't trouble you again":* Milly makes a critical decision here. She adores Kate, values her friendship, and enjoys her company. But she is bothered by the fact that Kate has avoided mentioning Densher, which, to Milly, seems to suggest a degree of dissembling on Kate's part. So Milly decides to set some limits on her friendship with Kate, not to trust her fully. This small choice propels Milly toward the isolation she will ultimately face in her struggle with her illness. Only Susan Stringham and hired servants will be with her in the end.

14 (p. 185) *"you ought of course ... to get out of London":* Why does Sir Luke advise Milly to get out of London? Is it merely because London is hot and uncomfortable in August? Sir Luke is perhaps too subtle for that. Presumably he feels Milly's privacy might be jeopardized if word got around London that she was seeing him. She could feel freer somewhere else. Besides, he might have felt she had already "done" London and might want to experience something new.

15 (p. 192) *Gibbon and Froude and Saint-Simon: Edward Gibbon* (1737-1794) wrote *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* ; James Froude (1818-1894) was a historian and disciple of Carlyle; Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was a French social reformer and founder of "positivist" philosophy.

16 (p. 210) *"Oh you may very well loathe me yet!":* It is impossible to tell, in this extraordinary passage, whether Kate has already conceived her scheme to link Densher and Milly. Kate does not know for sure that Milly is ill, though she surely suspects it. Milly is acute enough to be frightened by this creature who paces "like a panther," but the die is cast. Milly, despite her unease, is sure that along this route lies life, and she will not shrink from it. In the lines that follow, Kate, perhaps misreading Milly's mild reply, uses the dove image for the first time in the book.

17 (p. 242) *"I'll tell you another time":* Here, presumably, is a clear sign that Kate suspects the seriousness of Milly's illness, and is laying the groundwork for her plan. Densher is not quite ready to be brought in on the scheme.

18 (p. 289) *"You don't need to see":* This dialogue strikingly illustrates how James's narrative technique of letting us know Densher's thoughts contrasts with the way he portrays Kate by her gestures and her spoken words. The technique reinforces the portrayal of Kate as decisive, utterly sure of herself, a brilliant psychologist, and ruthless, and of Densher as full of doubts, sensitive but weak, and so in love with Kate that she can "lead him by the nose." She has been so completely caught up in the social "game" as to have become morally obtuse. But she does not kid herself; she knows what she is doing. Densher's vacillations and moral evasions are perhaps even less attractive than Kate's cynicism.

19 (p. 314) *and what most expressed it:* The action now shifts to Venice, where Milly has rented an expensive palazzo. It is now October. Eugenio, an Italian with a sharp eye for making money off tourists, has been hired to manage Milly's household. Though he spends Milly's money freely, he is an efficient manager and organizer and has a very good relationship with Milly and Mrs. Stringham. Milly sees him as taking charge of all practical matters and assisting Susan when Millv's health worsens. That it costs a great deal of money to keep the somewhat dilapidated old villa in good repair and to staff it with an array of servants is, of course, of no concern to Milly.

20 (p. 315) *Palazzo Leporelli* : The fictional palazzo is modeled on the actual Palazzo Barbaro, built in the

fifteenth century and owned by friends of Henry James. In 1887 Henry James stayed there with his friends the Daniel Curtises and wrote the short story “A London Life.”

21 (p. 347) *dusky labyrinthine alleys and empty campi, overhung with mouldering palaces:* This image conveys James’s sense of the decadence that affects European civilization. The physical decay—empty public squares, crumbling palaces, deserted banquet halls—parallels the moral corruption of a London society dominated by money grubbing, of the grasping servants led by Eugenio at the Palazzo Leporelli, and of the trio of Kate, Mrs. Lowder, and Densher maneuvering to fleece Milly.

22 (p. 348) *complications might sometimes have their tedium beguiled by a study of the question of how a gentleman would behave:* Densher’s self-exculpatory reasoning puts him in an unfavorable light here. He is justifying himself on the ground that he didn’t start the whole scheme and that he will always be a “gentleman.” He realizes that being a gentleman is not always easy to define and that being as passive as he has been is not a great thing. He wants to assert himself, but he is not sure how. He can’t run; he is in too deep. When he does assert himself, it is in a most unfortunate way. He compels Kate to come to his apartment to consummate their relationship, a crude trade of sex for his full cooperation that cheapens his relationship with her.

23 (p. 362) *“It’s a Veronese picture”:* Scholars have concluded that James is here referring to the Venetian painter Paolo Veronese’s *Marriage at Cana* (1562-1563), which depicts a banquet scene of great richness and prodigality.

24 (p. 364) *he shouldn’t have liked a man to see him :* This exchange with Mrs. Stringham is one of Densher’s least appealing moments. He suddenly feels ashamed of being a sensitive man, and, under the guise of honesty, displays a degree of male chauvinism that is even worse than Lord Mark’s. His perfidy seems to be gender-neutral. For a discussion of Densher’s dilemma from the perspective of gender relations and the complexities of gender issues in *The Wings of The Dove,* see Julie Olin-Ammentorp, “ ‘A Circle of Petticoats’: The Feminization of Merton Densher,” *Henry James Review* 14 (1993).

25 (p. 420) *“Oh!” he simply moaned into the gloom:* This agonizing tête- à-tête between Densher and Mrs. Stringham shows James at his masterly best in posing the central moral questions of the novel: From what depths of hatred does Lord Mark act? Is he beyond mere cynical exploitation of the situation? Does Densher perceive, to his horror, that *he* was doing essentially what Lord Mark was trying to do? Should Densher lie to Milly—as Mrs. Stringham, in essence, urges—to give her some happiness as death approaches? Did Kate, in fact, reveal to Lord Mark her relationship with Densher as a way to stave him (Lord Mark) off and/or to confound her aunt? That Densher can only moan into the gloom at least shows him more favorably than than he has appeared to this point. He begins to appreciate more fully what he has done; his “conversion” has begun.

26 (p. 440) *“She never wanted the truth.... She wanted you.... For that was your strength, my dear man—that she loves you with passion”*: Kate poses a key question: Is she correct in thinking Milly would have been comforted by Densher’s lying to her even though she knew it was a lie? And is Densher more concerned with his own honor than with Milly’s feelings?

Comments & Questions

In this section, we aim to provide the reader with an array of perspectives on the text, as well as questions that challenge those perspectives. The commentary has been culled from sources as diverse as reviews contemporaneous with the work, letters written by the author, literary criticism of later generations, and appreciations written throughout the work's history. Following the commentary, a series of questions seeks to filter Henry James's The Wings of the Dove through a variety of points of view and bring about a richer understanding of this enduring work.

Comments

WILLIAM JAMES

I have read *The Wings of the Dove* (for which all thanks!) but what shall I say of a book constructed on a method which so belies everything that I acknowledge as law? You've reversed every traditional canon of story-telling (especially the fundamental one of *telling* the story, which you carefully avoid) and have created a new genre *littéraire* which I can't help thinking perverse, but in which you *nevertheless succeed.*

—from a letter to Henry James (Fall 1902)

J. P. MOWBRAY

In trying to form anything like a comprehensive estimate of Mr. James's mature work, the effeminacy of it has to be counted with. One cannot call it virile, and—with the best examples still with us—hardly Saxon. —*from Critic* (November 1902)

—*from Critic* (November 1902)

SATURDAY

[The Wings of the Dove] consists of 576 closely printed pages. We were curious to know the average number of dashes, commas and semi-colons on a page; and we found the calculation entirely beyond our powers. Suffice it to say it is enormous; and most of these interruptions serve no purpose save that of making the reading more difficult. The effect is irritating: what might have been clean prose is broken, finicked, piffled away. Yet we see plainly enough that such lame writing is essential to the effect Mr. James wished to get. He wanted to make us feel all those artificial, subtle, trifling or meaningless changes of mood; and the more he makes us feel them the more artificial, trifling, meaningless we find them, and the less inclined we are to read on. We even suggest that the achievement of such a prose has become with Mr. James somewhat of an end in itself. The incessant 'perhaps' -es, and 'consciousness of something deeper still,' and 'clearly, as yet, seeing nothing'—these not only give that effect of blurred vision and lack of definite intention, but weave into a word-tissue which Mr. James seems to like and which we heartily dislike. It is a word-tissue that hides the author's thought—that gives one a sense of his reserve, aloofness. There is no energy, passion, color, and because there is no motion, there is no rhythm in this prose. The prose becomes as trivial as the trivial moods aroused by trivial middle-class things it is meant to express; and not from Mr. Henry James nor another do we require 576 pages of such prose fine-spun out with such an object.

After all, this kind of writing, crabbed, finicking, tedious in its struggle to be exact about nothing, marks a strong reaction against the kind that prevailed until twenty years ago or even later.

—January 1903

JOSEPH CONRAD

One is never set at rest by Mr. Henry James's novels. His books end as an episode in life ends. You remain

with the sense of the life still going on; and even the subtle presence of the dead is felt in that silence that comes upon the artist-creation when the last word has been read. It is eminently satisfying, but it is not final. Mr. Henry James, great artist and faithful historian, never attempts the impossible.

—from *North American Review* (January 1905)

GEORGE MOORE

I've read nothing of Henry James's that didn't suggest a scholar; so there shall be none of the old taunts—why does he not write complicated stories? Why does he always avoid decisive action? In his stories a woman never leaves the house with her lover, nor does a man ever kill another man or himself. Why is nothing ever accomplished ? In real life murder, adultery, and suicide are of common occurrence; but Mr. James's people live in a calm, sad, and very polite twilight of volition. Suicide or adultery has happened before the story begins, suicide or adultery happens some years after the characters have left the stage, but in front of the reader nothing happens.... Is there really much to say about people who live in stately houses and eat and drink their fill every day of the year? The lady, it is true, may have a lover, but the pen finds scanty pasturage of the fact; and in James's novels the lady only considers the question on the last page, and the gentleman looks at her questioningly.

—from *Confessions of a Young Man* (1916)

VIRGINIA WOOLF

How consciously Henry James set himself to look for the weak place in our amour of insensibility it is not necessary to decide. Let us turn to another story, *The Friends of Friends,* and judge whether he succeeded. This is the story of a man and woman who have been trying for years to meet but only accomplish their meeting on the night of the woman's death. After her death the meetings are continued, and when this is divined by the woman he is engaged to marry she refuses to go on with the marriage. The relationship is altered. Another person, she says, has come between them. 'You see her—you see her; you see her every night!' It is what we have come to call a typically Henry James situation. It is the same theme that was treated with enormous elaboration in *The Wings of the Dove.* Only there, when Milly has come between Kate and Densher and altered their relationship for ever, she has ceased to exist; here the anonymous lady goes on with her work after death. And yet—does it make very much difference? Henry James has only to take the smallest steps and he is over the border. His characters with their extreme fineness of perception are already half way out of the body. There is nothing violent in their release. They seem rather to have achieved at last what they have long been attempting—communication without obstacle. But Henry James, after all, kept his ghosts for his ghost stories. Obstacles are essential to The Wings of the Dove.

—from *Times Literary Supplement* (December 22, 1921)

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Henry James had turned his back on one of the great events in the world's history, the rise of the United States, in order to report tittle-tattle at tea parties in English country houses.

—from *Cakes and Ale:* or, *The Skeleton in the Cupboard* (1930)

Questions

1. What does the prose style of *The Wings of the Dove* accomplish that a more direct style does not? What can it not accomplish that a more direct style can? How would you formulate a description of James's late style? He himself in an offhand moment described it as "sub-aqueous."
2. Of James's late fiction George Moore asks, "Why does he always avoid decisive action? ... Why is nothing ever accomplished? ... Mr. James's people live in a calm, sad, and very polite twilight of volition.... Is there really much to say about people who live in stately houses and eat and drink their fill every day of the year?" Has George Moore got it right? Is he being fair? And what do you think about Somerset Maugham's observation that what James does is "report tittle-tattle at tea parties in English country houses"?
3. Some readers of *The Wings of the Dove* have found in the novel a sense of doom, a sense of a civilization in a decline and about to crash. Do you see this in the book? How is this sense or atmosphere created?

4. In spite of the somewhat rarified milieu of the novel, do the characters seem to you to be motivated by the same ambitions, emotions, fears, and desires as, say, a group of average Americans? Or a group of movie stars, factory workers, or Appalachian Amish—in spite of the differences in circumstances? In other words, are James's characters fully human?
5. What would you say is an accurate characterization of Merton Densher? He thinks too much? He's weak? He has flaws but is essentially a good man? He begins ill and ends well? He is despicable? Instead of doing what he did, what should he have done?

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a

Rock on the Rhine River associated with a number of legendary tales; in the commonest form, the Lorelei is the spirit of a maiden who drowned herself in despair over a faithless lover and who now acts as a siren luring fishermen to their deaths.

b

Mountain ridge (French).

c

Greek god, protector of cattle, sheep, and travelers, who was a messenger of the gods and guided the dead to the underworld; son of Zeus.

d

Let's not speak of it further (French).

e

In Victorian England to have a coach with four horses was a sign of genuine affluence.

f

Aunt Maud Lowder's elegant house, a mansion on Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, in an upper-crust section of London.

g

Latin name for the outermost limit of the inhabited world; hence, barren and cold.

h

Densher is thinking of Kate's visit to her father in the novel's opening scene.

i

Corruption of the Sanskrit word *Jagannatha,* the manifestation of the Hindu god Krishna. The deity was honoured at a festival in which wooden images of the god were placed in an extremely heavy, highly carved chariot (car) that was pulled forward by hundreds of followers. Contemporary Europeans erroneously believed that devotees threw themselves under the wheels of the chariot to be crushed; hence, the colloquial usage of "Juggernaut" as a relentless, overpowering, and irrational force.

j

Tourist guide.

k

The London firm of John Murray published tourist handbooks.

l

The "it" refers to Mrs. Stringham's imagination.

m

Colloquial term for tools or implements; in this context a reference to Mrs. Stringham's literary skills being honed and ready. Elsewhere, James uses "nippers" to mean the nosepiece of a pair of eyeglasses.

n

Boston newspaper of the period.

o

Literary figures of the nineteenth century: Belgian dramatist and poet Maurice Maeterlinck; British critic Walter Pater; French nobleman and memoirist Jean-Baptiste Antoine Marcellin Marbot; and German historian Ferdinand Adolf Gregorovius.

p

Allusion to Alfred Tennyson's poem "Locksley Hall" (1842), in which European cosmopolitanism is ironically contrasted with English provincialism.

q

Fashion of the day (French).

r

German publishing house that specialized in reprinting British and American works.

s

“ ’Till then!” or “Soon!” (French).

t

Stagecoach.

u

Former (Latin).

v

Thomas Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), eminent Scottish-born essayist, philosopher, and man of letters.

w

Novel by William Makepeace Thackeray, published in 1855.

x

Beautiful (memorable) moments; perhaps akin to the “spots in time” of poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850). Milly’s speech here comes close to revealing her true condition to Susie for the first time; it is the closest thing to a religious conviction or belief in the afterlife that we hear from Milly.

y

Fickle; flighty (French).

z

Milly and Susan are now visiting Lord Mark’s county estate; the scene is a garden party.

aa

Diplomatic•Diplomatic reception held by an Indian prince.

ab

Boorish people (French).

ac

Beautiful eyes (French).

ad

Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572), a well-known Venetian portraitist.

ae

More or less (French).

af

The portrait is of Lucrezia Panciatichi (c.1540); it is in the Uffizi museum in Florence. Lord Mark’s estate is a product of Henry James’s imagination.

ag

Great minds think alike! (French).

ah

Lord Mark’s estate.

ai

Literally, a series of miniature scenes viewed through a pinhole in a special box; in this case, the designs seen in a kaleidoscope.

aj

Peddlers’ carts.

ak

The The term refers to the Eastern Roman Empire prior to the Turkish conquest in the fifteenth century.

al

Unhoped for; unexpected (French).

am

Allusion to Aunt Maud’s expensive porcelain from Sèvres, France.

an

Tawdry beginnings.

ao

French short-story writer and novelist (1850-1893) of the “naturalist” school.

ap

These ladies (French).

aq

Discussions (French).

ar

Paolo Veronese (1528-1588), Venetian painter whose figures wore rich, colourful costumes.

as

Here, “nippers” refers to the nosepiece of Lord Mark’s eyeglasses.

at

Means (French); his estate, wealth.

au

Apartment (Italian).

av

Water taxi (Italian).

aw

Good, decent (French).

ax

Public squares (Italian).

ay

Arcades (Italian).

az

Clear Clear judgment (French).

ba

Entrance gate (Italian).

bb

Young lady of the house (Italian); that is, Milly.

bc

Not well; indisposed (Italian).

bd

Main floor in a Renaissance building, usually one level about the ground floor and containing important reception rooms (Italian).

be

Good-looking (Italian).

bf

Street flanking the canal (Italian).

bg

The gondola’s small cabin (Italian); seen from behind.

bh

Sitting room (Italian).

bi

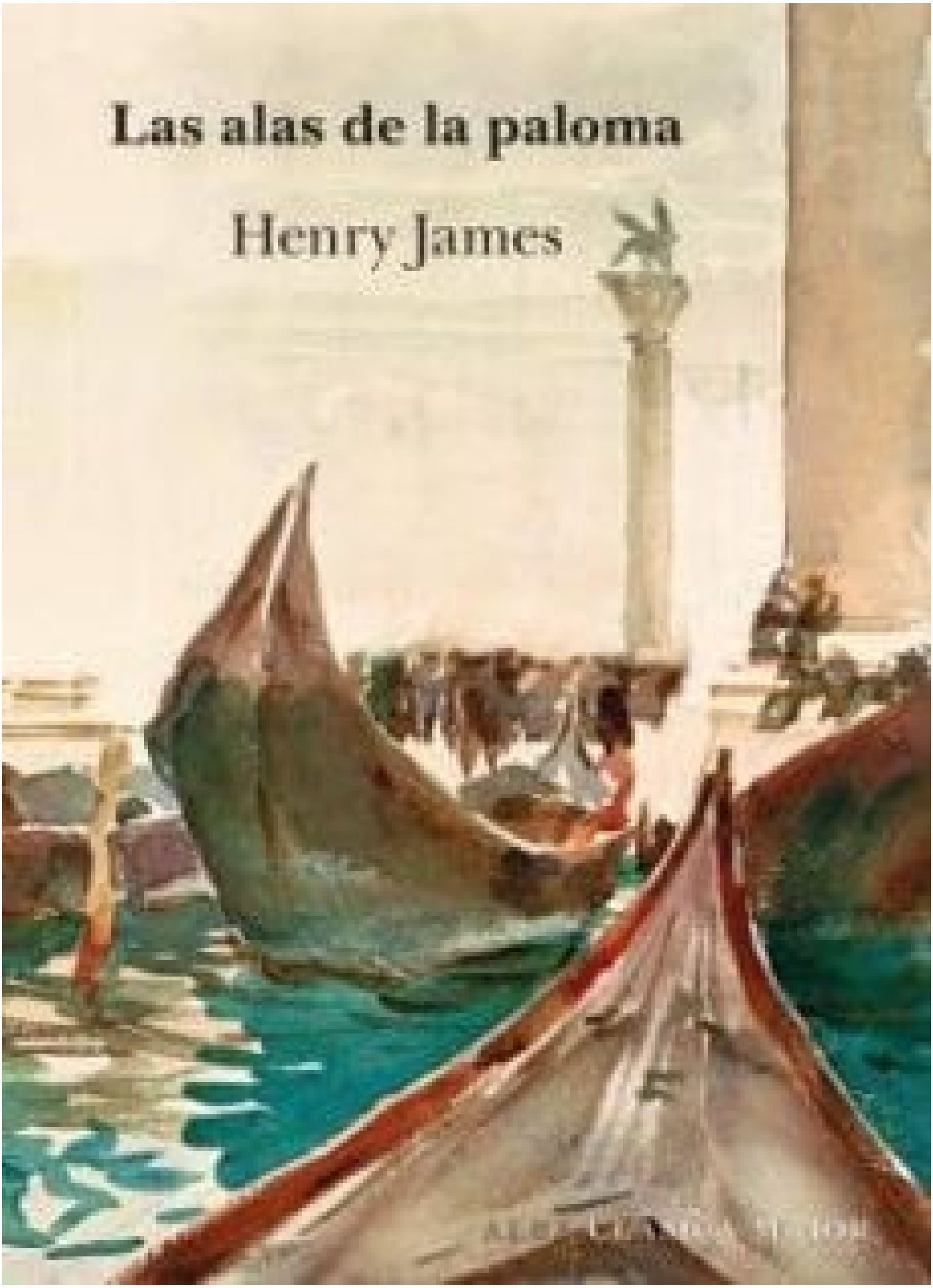
Brompton Oratory, a Roman Catholic church offering informal services; opened in 1884.

bj

Action (French).

Las alas de la paloma

Henry James



Kate Croy, una joven londinense, cree que «a los veinticinco años» es «ya tarde para recapacitar». Huérfana de madre, con una hermana viuda, pobre y cargada de hijos, y un padre proscrito y siniestro, queda bajo la tutela de una tía rica, que espera casarla con un buen partido… aunque sabe que ella está enamorada de Merton Densher, un periodista apuesto y encantador —«esa sabandija miserable», según el padre— pero sin la menor perspectiva de futuro. La hermosa Kate, en esta encrucijada, apenas cuenta, como dice su enamorado, con su «talento para la vida» y no dudará en aprovechar cualquier oportunidad. La aparición de una riquísima «paloma» norteamericana, Milly Theale, que en tres semanas se convierte en la figura más solicitada de la buena sociedad, inspirará no sólo la curiosidad y la adulación de todo Londres sino también los planes e intereses más diversos… incluido, quizá, alguno de Kate.

Las alas de la paloma (1902) —que aquí presentamos en una nueva traducción de Miguel Temprano García — es una de las grandes novelas de la etapa final de Henry James y en ella, con gran maestría, los acontecimientos se desvelan poco a poco y no sin que uno deba luchar contra sus propias aprensiones sobre lo que va intuyendo. Con un suspense que es reflejo de la tensión de alguno de sus personajes, James consigue, de una forma que seguramente no ha alcanzado otra novela, que en el lector se reproduzcan literalmente los dilemas y estremecimientos que va planteando la trama. Nunca se ha visto un ejemplo tan perfecto de fusión entre conciencia de un personaje y conciencia del lector.

Henry James

Las alas de la paloma

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Henry James, 1902
Traducción: Miguel Temprano García

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Nota al texto

Las alas de la paloma se publicó en 1902 simultáneamente en Londres (Archibald Constable and Co.) y Nueva York (Charles
Scribner's
Sons), y en 1909 se reeditó, revisada por el autor, en los volúmenes XIX y XX de la llamada Edición de Nueva York. En esta edición, James llegó a alterar sustancialmente muchos de sus relatos y novelas, pero en el caso de *Las alas de la paloma*, escrita ya en una fecha que él mismo consideraba dentro de su «último estilo», los cambios y correcciones fueron mucho menores. De tal manera que, si en otras obras las modernas ediciones prefieren recuperar los textos tal como se publicaron por primera vez, antes de las intervenciones posteriores que tanto los modificaron, en esta novela se suele respetar el criterio último de su autor. Nuestra traducción, por tanto, ha seguido el texto fijado por la Edición de Nueva York.

Volumen I

Libro I

I

Aguardaba, Kate Croy, a que entrara su padre, pero la estaba haciendo esperar sin la menor consideración, y a veces veía, reflejado en el espejo de la chimenea, un rostro decididamente pálido por el enfado que la había llevado casi al punto de marcharse sin verle. No obstante, fue precisamente al llegar a ese punto cuando decidió quedarse; se cambió de sitio y fue del sofá raído hasta el sillón con brillos en la tapicería que sólo con tocarla producía —lo había comprobado— una sensación pegajosa y resbaladiza. Había contemplado las estampas amarillentas de las paredes y la revista solitaria de hacía más de un año, que contribuía, junto con la lamparita de pantalla coloreada y un tapete blanco no demasiado limpio, a exagerar el efecto del mantel púrpura que había sobre la mesa; sobre todo había salido de vez en cuando al balconcillo al que daban acceso dos altas cristaleras. Desde esa perspectiva, aquel callejón vulgar ofrecía un parco consuelo a la salita no menos vulgar; su principal función era recordarle que las estrechas y ennegrecidas fachadas principales, ajustadas a unos esquemas que habrían parecido poca cosa incluso en la parte de atrás de un edificio, constituían la cara pública presagiada por tales intimidades. Uno las intuía en aquel cuarto exactamente igual que intuía otras cien salitas iguales o peores desde la calle. Cada vez que volvía a entrar, cada vez que, llevada por su impaciencia, estaba a punto de marcharse, era para sumirse en un abismo más profundo, mientras saboreaba la vaga e insulsa emanación de las cosas, el fracaso de la fortuna y el honor. En realidad, si seguía esperando era, en cierto sentido, para no añadir, a todas las demás vergüenzas, la vergüenza del miedo, del fracaso individual y personal. Sentir la calle, sentir la salita, sentir el mantel y el tapete y la lámpara, le permitía tener al menos la leve y saludable sensación de no estar mintiendo ni escurriendo el bulto. Esta visión de conjunto era no obstante lo peor de todo, pues incluía en particular la conversación para la que se había preparado, y ¿para qué había ido sino para lo peor? Intentó estar triste para no enfadarse, pero le enfadaba no poder estar triste. Y, sin embargo, ¿qué mayor tristeza, una tristeza demasiado baqueteada para poderle reprochar nada, y marcada con tiza por el destino igual que un lote en una subasta, que la de esos indicios indiscutibles de unos sentimientos rancios y mezquinos?

La vida de su padre, la de su hermana, la suya, la de sus dos hermanos desaparecidos… la historia de su familia causaba el mismo efecto que una frase elegante, florida y ampulosa, incluso musical, que primero se expresara con palabras, luego con notas sin sentido y por fin quedase inacabada sin notas ni palabras. ¿Por qué iba un grupo de personas así a ponerse en marcha con tantos aspavientos, como si estuviesen equipadas para un viaje provechoso, para luego fracasar sin haber sufrido ningún accidente y tenderse sin motivo en el polvo de la cuneta? La respuesta a estas preguntas no se encontraba en Chirk Street, pero las preguntas sí se planteaban allí, y las repetidas paradas de la joven delante del espejo y la chimenea bien podían haber representado lo más parecido a un intento de escapar de ellas. ¿Acaso no era de hecho una escapatoria parcial de lo peor cerciorarse de que era atractiva? Se contemplaba con demasiada intensidad en el espejo empañado para estar admirando sólo su belleza. Corrigió el ángulo del sombrero negro de plumas, retocó por debajo la espesa mata de cabello oscuro y continuó mirando de soslayo, tanto de frente como de perfil, el bello óvalo de su rostro. Iba vestida de negro de pies a cabeza y eso proporcionaba, por contraste, un tono más uniforme a su tez clara y mayor armonía a su cabello negro. Fuera, en el balcón, sus ojos eran azules; dentro, reflejados en el espejo, parecían casi negros. Era guapa, pero la suya era una belleza que no necesitaba de afeites ni cosméticos, circunstancia que por otro lado influía casi siempre en la impresión que producía. Dicha impresión era duradera, sin que pudiera decirse que el total fuese la suma de las causas. Tenía estatura sin ser alta, gracia sin necesidad de moverse, presencia sin ser corpulenta. Sencilla y esbelta, a menudo callada, estaba en cierto modo siempre a la vista: contribuía singularmente a satisfacer ese sentido. Más «vestida», a menudo, con menos accesorios que otras mujeres, o menos vestida, si la ocasión lo requería, con más, probablemente ni ella misma habría sabido explicar la clave de semejantes aciertos. Eran misterios de los que sus amigos eran conscientes, esos amigos cuya mejor explicación consistía en afirmar

que era inteligente, sin que quedase muy claro si creían que era la causa o el efecto de su encanto. Si hubiese visto algo más aparte de su hermoso rostro en el turbio espejo de casa de su padre, habría reparado en que, al fin y al cabo, ella no formaba parte del derrumbe. No se tenía por vulgar y no contribuía a la miseria. Personalmente, al menos, no estaba marcada con tiza para la subasta. Todavía no se había rendido y la frase interrumpida, si ella era la última palabra, acabaría teniendo algún significado. Hubo un minuto en el que, aunque sus ojos siguieron pendientes del espejo, se quedó visiblemente ensimismada, pensando en el modo en que podría haber cambiado las cosas de haber nacido hombre. Ante todo se habría hecho cargo del apellido, el precioso apellido que tanto le gustaba y para el que, a pesar del daño infligido por su desdichado padre, todavía quedaban esperanzas. De hecho, lo quería aún con más ternura por culpa de esa herida sangrante. Pero ¿qué podía hacer una joven sin un penique sino dejar que se perdiera?

Cuando por fin apareció su padre ella comprendió enseguida, como de costumbre, la futilidad de cualquier intento de obligarle a nada. Le había escrito diciéndole que estaba enfermo, demasiado enfermo para salir de su cuarto, y que debía verla cuanto antes; y si, como parecía probable, se trataba de un plan premeditado, había descuidado con total indiferencia hasta el elemental acabado que exige cualquier engaño. Estaba claro que, debido a las perversidades que él llamaba razones, había querido verla, igual que ella se había preparado para tener una conversación; pero Kate volvió a sentir, en la inevitabilidad de la desenvoltura que mostraba con ella, el viejo dolor, idéntico al que había sentido su madre, que su padre causaba siempre aunque te rozara apenas un instante. Ninguna relación con él podía ser tan breve o superficial que no resultara dolorosa; y, por raro que pareciese, no era porque él así lo deseara, pues por fuerza debía intuir a menudo sus desventajas, sino porque era incapaz de pasar por alto hasta el menor malentendido o de dejar a un lado tus limitaciones sin subrayarlas. Podría haberla esperado en el sofá de su saloncito, o haberse quedado en cama y haberla recibido allí. Kate se alegró de haberse ahorrado la visión de semejante *penetralia*[1] aunque eso no habría puesto tan en evidencia su falta de sinceridad. De ahí lo fatigoso de cada nuevo encuentro: repartía mentiras como si fuesen cartas de la grasienta baraja del juego de la diplomacia que te sentabas a disputar con él. El inconveniente —como sucede siempre en esos casos— no era que lo falso te incomodara, sino que echabas en falta lo verdadero. Tal vez estuviese enfermo, y quisieras darte por enterado, pero ningún contacto con él por ese motivo sería nunca lo bastante sincero. Incluso podía estar muriéndose, pero Kate se preguntaba justamente qué pruebas tendría que aportar él en tal caso para que ella lo creyera.

En esta ocasión no venía de su dormitorio, que ella sabía que se hallaba justo encima de la salita donde estaban: llegaba de la calle, aunque, si se lo hubiese reprochado, él lo habría negado o utilizado como prueba de su alarmante estado. No obstante, a estas alturas, ya había dejado de reprocharle nada; no sólo porque en cualquier enfrentamiento con él hasta la más vana irritación acababa desvaneciéndose, sino porque contaminaba de tal modo la conciencia trágica que al cabo de un momento no quedaba nada de ella. Y lo malo era que contaminaba del mismo modo la conciencia cómica: Kate casi había llegado a pensar que, pese a todo, esta última podría haberle procurado un asidero para acercarse a él. Pero su padre había dejado de ser gracioso, de hecho era casi inhumano. Su buena presencia, que tanto tiempo lo había mantenido a flote, seguía siendo irreprochable, aunque hacía mucho que se daba por descontada. No había prueba mejor de que Kate estaba en lo cierto. Lo vio exactamente igual que siempre, con la piel sonrosada y el cabello plateado, la figura erguida y la camisa almidonada, el hombre menos vinculado del mundo a algo desagradable. Era, ante todo, el perfecto caballero inglés, y una persona normal, afortunada y acomodada. Al verlo sentado a la mesa de un restaurante de menú, lo único que te venía a la cabeza era: «¡Con qué perfección los produce Inglaterra!». Tenía ojos amables que inspiraban confianza y una voz que, a pesar de su límpida rotundidad, dejaba claro de algún modo que nunca había tenido necesidad de alzarse. La vida se había topado con él a mitad de camino y se había desviado para acompañarle cogida del brazo y adaptándose a su paso. Quienes no lo conocían exclamaban: «¡Cómo viste!»; quienes lo conocían mejor decían: «¿Cómo se las arreglará?». El fugaz destello burlón en los ojos de su hija respondía a la extraña sensación que tuvo de estar recibiendo ella a alguien en aquella sórdida salita. Por un minuto fue como si la casa fuese suya y él el visitante cohibido. Tenía artes indescriptibles para hacerte sentir incómoda y darle la vuelta a la situación: así había sido siempre como había ido a visitar a su madre cuando ella se avenía a verle. Llegaba de sitios que a menudo desconocían, pero hablaba con condescendencia de Lexham Gardens. No obstante, la única expresión de impaciencia de Kate fue:

—¡Me alegro de que estés mucho mejor!

—No estoy mucho mejor, cariño… estoy fatal; la prueba es que he ido a la farmacia, a ver a ese individuo tan desagradable de la esquina. —De este modo, el señor Croy demostró que sabía estar por encima de la humilde mano que lo sanaba—. Estoy tomando una medicina que me ha preparado. Por eso

mismo te he mandado llamar, para que veas de verdad cómo estoy.

—¡Oh, papá, hace mucho que he dejado de verte más que como estás en realidad! Creo que a estas alturas todos hemos llegado a la misma conclusión: eres guapísimo… *parlons plus n'en*[2]. Estás tan guapo como siempre, espléndido.

Entretanto, él juzgó la apariencia de su hija, tal como Kate sabía a ciencia cierta que haría en cualquier circunstancia: apreciando, valorando, criticando en ocasiones lo que llevaba, y demostrándole así el interés que seguía sintiendo por ella. Puede que en realidad no le interesara lo más mínimo, pero a Kate le constaba que ella era la criatura que menos indiferencia le producía del mundo. Con frecuencia se había preguntado qué podía ser lo que le complacía tanto a su edad y siempre había llegado a la misma conclusión. Le complacía que fuera guapa y que fuese, a su manera, un valor fiable. Aunque era al menos igual de evidente que condiciones similares, en tanto que formaban parte del pasado, no le complacían lo más mínimo en su otra hija. La pobre Marian podía ser guapa, pero desde luego a él le daba igual. Por supuesto, la clave era que, por muy guapa que fuese, su hermana, viuda y casi necesitada, con cuatro críos sanos y rozagantes, no era un valor fiable. Lo siguiente que Kate le preguntó fue cuánto tiempo llevaba viviendo en esa casa, aun sabiendo lo poco que importaba y lo poco que tendría que ver con la verdad la respuesta que pudiera darle. De hecho ni siquiera escuchó la respuesta, sincera o no, pues estaba ocupada con lo que por su parte tenía que decirle. Eso era lo que de verdad la había empujado a esperar y lo que se había impuesto al escaso resentimiento que le inspiraban aún las constantes y repetidas impertinencias de su padre; y el resultado fue que, en menos de un minuto, le había dicho todo lo que tenía que decirle.

—Sí… incluso ahora estoy dispuesta a irme contigo. No sé lo que ibas a decirme, pero aunque no me hubieses escrito habrías tenido noticias mías en uno o dos días. Han pasado muchas cosas y si he esperado ha sido sólo para estar segura antes de venir a verte. Ya lo estoy. Me iré contigo.

Sus palabras no dejaron de causar efecto.

—Venirte conmigo ¿adónde?

—A cualquier parte. Me quedaré contigo. Aunque sea aquí.

Se había quitado los guantes y, como si hubiese conseguido salirse con la suya, tomó asiento.

Lionel Croy aguardó con su habitual desenvoltura como si, a raíz de estas palabras, necesitara de un pretexto para echarse atrás fácilmente, y ella comprendió al instante que había menospreciado, por decirlo así, lo que tramaba su padre. No quería que se fuese con él y, menos aún, que se quedara a vivir en su casa, y la había convocado para despedirse con cierta grandeza y elegancia, aunque parte de la belleza de semejante despedida tenía que consistir en su sacrificio ante el desapego de su hija. Si ella no quería renunciar a él no habría elegancia ni grandeza. Por lo que su intención había sido dejar que ella tomase la decisión con toda nobleza, y ni mucho menos apartarla de verdad. No obstante, a Kate le importaba un bledo que pudiera sentirse avergonzado, pues sabía que tampoco a ella la movían sentimientos caritativos. Y, por encima de todo, lo había visto tantas veces en tantas poses distintas que bien podía privarle ahora sin compunción del lujo de que adoptara una nueva. No obstante, notó el desconcierto en su tono cuando dijo con voz entrecortada:

—¡Hija mía, nunca consentiría tal cosa!

—Y ¿qué vas a hacer?

—Lo estoy meditando —respondió Lionel Croy—. Ya imaginarás que no me queda otra opción.

—Entonces —preguntó su hija— ¿no has pensado en lo que te he dicho, lo de que estoy dispuesta?

Con las manos a la espalda y las piernas ligeramente separadas, el padre se balanceó de delante atrás y se inclinó hacia ella como de puntillas, lo cual produjo un efecto premeditado y decoroso.

—No. No lo he pensado. No podría. Ni querría.

Ante una actuación tan meritoria, su hija volvió a sentir, junto con el recuerdo de la antigua desesperación que antes reinaba en la casa, lo poco que, siquiera por casualidad, revelaba de él su apariencia. La confianza que inspiraba había sido la más pesada de las cruces que había tenido que sobrellevar su madre; y, por fuerza, una mucho más evidente para el mundo que cualquier acto horrible que pudiera haber cometido y que, gracias a Dios, ellas desconocían. Sin duda había sido, a su manera, por su peculiar carácter, un marido terrible del que separarse: volvía odiosa a la mujer que lo encontraba desagradable. ¿No era eso mismo lo que impulsaba a Kate a tener presente que, en determinados aspectos, podría no serle fácil dejar solo a un padre con esa cara y esos modales? No obstante, y aunque hubiese muchas cosas que ella desconocía y que no imaginaba siquiera, en ese mismo instante quedó claro para ambos que estaba más que acostumbrado a ser objeto de semejantes cavilaciones. Igual que la agraciada presencia física de su hija pequeña le parecía un valor fiable, había sabido desde el primer momento, y con

mayor exactitud si cabe, calcular hasta el último detalle de la suya. La gran sorpresa no era que a pesar de todo le hubiese sido útil; la gran sorpresa era que no lo hubiese sido aún más. En ese mismo instante lo era, con su consabido tono eterno y recurrente: la prueba estaba en la paciencia que demostraba tener ella. Un momento después, intuyó exactamente la estrategia de su padre.

—¿Me pides de verdad que crea que es lo que has decidido?

Kate tuvo que pararse a considerar su respuesta.

—Me da igual lo que creas, papá. Lo cierto es que nunca he pensado que creas nada, igual que —se permitió añadir— tampoco concibo que te crea nadie. Como ves, no te conozco.

—Y ¿crees que puedes remediarlo?

—Oh, no, papá; ni mucho menos. No es eso. Si a estas alturas no he llegado a entenderte, ya no lo haré, y me da igual. He pensado que podría vivir contigo, pero no que pueda llegar a entenderte. Claro que no tengo ni idea de cómo te van las cosas.

—No me van —respondió el señor Croy casi con alegría.

Su hija volvió a examinar la salita, y le resultó raro que un sitio donde había tan poco que ver tuviese tanto que mostrar. Lo que mostraba era una fealdad tan palpable y evidente que en cierto sentido servía de punto de apoyo. Era un medio, un decorado, y, después de todo, un espantoso signo de vida que le permitió no andarse con rodeos.

—Oh, perdón. Nadas en la abundancia.

—¿Es que vas a reprocharme otra vez que no me haya suicidado? —dijo él con voz amable.

Kate no creyó que su pregunta necesitase respuesta; estaba ahí para hablar de cosas concretas.

—Ya sabrás lo preocupadas que estamos después de leer el testamento de mamá. Tenía menos aún para dejarnos de lo que se temía. No sabemos cómo se las arreglaba para vivir. Todo asciende a unas doscientas libras al año para Marian, y otras doscientas para mí, aunque yo voy a pasarle cien a Marian.

—¡Débil mujer! —suspiró su padre con amabilidad.

—Las otras cien —prosiguió su hija— podrían sernos de ayuda a ti y a mí.

—¿Y lo demás?

—¿Tú no puedes aportar nada?

Su padre la miró, se metió las manos en los bolsillos, se apartó y se detuvo un instante al lado de la cristalera que ella había dejado abierta. Kate no insistió más. Lo había arrinconado con esa pregunta y el silencio se extendió un minuto y sólo se vio interrumpido por los gritos de un vendedor ambulante, que se colaron con el suave aire de marzo, con la luz raída que tan poco favorecedora resultaba para la salita, y con el acostumbrado bullicio de Chirk Street. Luego volvió a acercarse como si la pregunta hubiese quedado pendiente en el aire.

—No entiendo por qué te enfadas tanto de pronto.

—Pensé que lo adivinarías. En todo caso, deja que te diga que la tía Maud me ha hecho una propuesta. Aunque también me ha impuesto una condición. Quiere que me quede a vivir con ella.

—Y ¿qué otra cosa iba a querer?

—¡Oh!, no sé… muchas cosas. No soy una presa tan codiciada —respondió la joven en un tono un tanto cortante—. Nadie me lo había pedido antes.

Sin perder la compostura, su padre pareció más sorprendido que interesado.

—¿Nunca te han hecho proposiciones?

Lo dijo como si fuese increíble tratándose de la hija de Lionel Croy, como si de hecho semejante admisión fuese casi incompatible, aun en un momento de intimidad filial, con el espíritu elevado y la buena figura de su hija.

—No parientes ricos. Es muy buena conmigo, pero dice que ya va siendo hora de que nos entendamos.

El señor Croy no pudo estar más de acuerdo.

—Pues claro que sí, desde luego, y creo saber de qué habla.

—¿Ah, sí?

—Por supuesto. Insinúa que será muy generosa si rompes conmigo. Has dicho que te había puesto una condición. Por supuesto es ésa.

—Bueno, pues por eso me he enfadado —dijo Kate—. Y aquí estoy.

Él demostró con un gesto que se hacía cargo y que en unos pocos segundos había considerado la cuestión desde todos los ángulos.

—¿De verdad crees que estoy en situación de dejar que te vengas a vivir conmigo?

Kate tardó un instante en responder, pero cuando habló su respuesta fue clara:

—Sí.

—Entonces es que eres mucho más tonta de lo que me habría atrevido a creer.

—¿Por qué? Estás vivo. Floreciente. En pleno esplendor.

—¡Ay, cuánto me habéis odiado siempre! —murmuró él, mirando pensativo hacia la cristalera.

—No se me ocurre nadie menos parecido a un simple recuerdo —afirmó ella como si no le hubiese oído —. Eres una persona tan vital como cualquiera. Acabamos de acordar que eres guapo. Tengo la sensación de que, a tu manera, eres más práctico que yo. Así que no me vengas con que el hecho de que seamos, al fin y al cabo, padre e hija sea algo monstruoso. En algo tendrá que notarse ese parentesco. Como acabo de decirte —continuó—, no entiendo tu manera de vivir, pero aun así te ofrezco aceptarla. Y, por mi parte, haré por ti todo lo que pueda.

—Entiendo —dijo Lionel Croy. Y luego añadió, como si no pudiera ser más pertinente—: Y ¿qué puedes hacer? —Sólo entonces dudó ella, y él aprovechó su silencio—. Acabas de describirte a ti misma, y para ti misma, como si, con un noble gesto, fueses a renunciar a tu tía por mí; pero ¿qué beneficio, quisiera saber, podría reportarme tu noble gesto? —Como Kate siguió sin decir nada, él se extendió un poco—. Recuerda que, dadas las delicadas circunstancias en que nos hallamos, no tenemos tanto como para podernos permitir rechazar una mano tendida. Me gusta tu forma de hablar, cariño, ¡todo eso de «renunciar» a tu tía! Pero no hay por qué dejar de usar cuchara porque haya que vivir sólo de caldo. Y ten en cuenta que tu cuchara, es decir, tu tía, también es en parte la mía. —Ella se puso en pie, como si no pudiera hacer más esfuerzos y comprendiese la futilidad y la fatiga de tantas cosas, y se plantó otra vez delante del desdichado espejito con el que había dialogado antes. Volvió a corregir el ángulo del sombrero y eso llevó a los labios de su padre otra observación, en la que, no obstante, la impaciencia había sido sustituida por un raro destello de aprecio—. ¡Oh, estás muy guapa! ¡No lo estropees mezclándote conmigo!

Su hija se volvió hacia él.

—La condición que me impone la tía Maud es que no vuelva a tener ninguna relación contigo: que no vuelva a verte, a hablarte ni a escribirte, que no me acerque a ti, ni te salude, ni me comunique contigo de ningún modo. Lo que exige es que, sencillamente, dejes de existir para mí.

Su padre siempre daba la impresión —era una de esas características suyas que la gente tildaba de «inefables»— de andar de puntillas, como con desenfado, cuando le insultaban. No obstante, nada tan sorprendente como las cosas que en ocasiones le parecían insultantes, salvo tal vez las que no se lo parecían. En todo caso, en esta ocasión se puso de puntillas.

—Es una exigencia muy justa de tu tía Maud, cariño… ¡no dudo en reconocerlo! —Sin embargo, como, a pesar de lo bien que lo conocía Kate, sus palabras la dejaron sin respuesta y con una leve sensación de náusea, tuvo tiempo para continuar—: En fin, ya sabemos su condición. Pero ¿cuáles son sus promesas? ¿A qué se ha comprometido? Ahí es donde hay que presionarla.

—¿Quieres que le insista en lo unida que estoy a ti? —preguntó Kate al cabo de un momento.

—Más bien en lo cruel e injusto que te parece ese tratado que te quiere hacer firmar. Entiendo que no soy más que un pobre padre demasiado anciano para oponerme a tu renuncia. Pero tampoco soy tan viejo para no obtener algo a cambio.

—¡Oh!, creo que su plan —respondió Kate casi con alegría— es colmarme de atenciones.

Él respondió con su inimitable desenvoltura.

—Pero ¿te ha dado los detalles?

La joven le siguió la corriente.

—Más o menos, diría yo. Aunque muchos pueden darse por descontados, son cosas que las mujeres hacen las unas por las otras y que no entenderías.

—¡Siempre he entendido mejor lo que no necesito entender! Pero, verás, lo que quiero es que seas consciente de que se te ha presentado una gran oportunidad, por la que, maldita sea, deberías estarme agradecida después de todo.

—Confieso —observó Kate— que no acabo de ver qué tiene mi conciencia que ver con todo esto.

—Entonces, hija mía, sencillamente deberías avergonzarte. ¿Sabes de qué sois la prueba las personas vacías y despiadadas como tú? —planteó la pregunta con el encanto de un repentino acaloramiento espiritual—. De la moralidad deplorable y superficial de la época. Con esta vida vulgar y brutal que nos vemos obligados a llevar, el sentimiento familiar ha acabado yéndose al garete. Hubo un tiempo en que un hombre como yo —y con eso me refiero a un padre como yo— habría sido muy valioso para ti, incluso eso que, según tengo entendido, llaman en el argot de los negocios un «activo» —continuó con su argumentación, como si tal cosa—. Y no hablo sólo de lo que podrías hacer por mí si me quisieras, sino de lo que podrías, y a eso me refiero con lo de tu oportunidad, hacer conmigo. A no ser, claro, que ambas cosas se reduzcan a lo mismo —añadió imperturbable un instante después—. Tienes la ocasión y el deber,

tú ya me entiendes, de utilizarme. Puedes demostrar tu apego a tu familia entendiendo para lo que sirvo. Si fueses capaz de verlo con mis ojos, comprenderías que aún sirvo para… en fin, para muchas cosas. De hecho, cariño, gracias a mí podrías conseguir un carruaje de cuatro caballos. —Su conclusión, o más bien su punto culminante, no causó el efecto deseado por culpa de una mal calculada precipitación de la memoria. Recordó lo que había dicho su hija—. ¿Has acordado ceder la mitad de tu pequeña herencia?

Las dudas de Kate se convirtieron en risas.

—No, no he «acordado» nada.

—Pero en la práctica ¿vas a dejar que se la embolse Marian? —Se miraron a los ojos, pero ella no aceptó el desafío y su padre no tuvo más remedio que continuar—. ¿Quieres que se embolse trescientas libras al año además de lo que le dejó su marido? ¿Es ésa —quiso saber el lejano progenitor de semejante despropósito— tu moralidad?

Kate encontró su respuesta sin dificultad.

—¿Opinas que debería dártelo todo a ti?

Lo de «todo» le conmovió incluso hasta el punto de determinar el tono de su respuesta.

—Ni mucho menos. ¿Cómo puedes preguntarlo si acabo de rechazar lo que afirmas que has venido a ofrecerme? Interpreta como quieras mis palabras, creo que ya me he explicado lo suficiente, y ahora es cuestión de tomarlo o dejarlo. No tengo más que decir: he puesto todos los huevos en una cesta. Es, en resumidas cuentas, lo que opino de tu obligación.

La joven consideró sus palabras con una sonrisa fatigada, como si hubiesen adquirido una pequeña y grotesca visibilidad.

—¡Eres increíble con estas cosas! Más vale dejar claro —continuó— que si firmo el acuerdo con mi tía haré honor a mi palabra y lo cumpliré hasta la última coma.

—Pues ¡claro, cariño! Es precisamente a tu honor al que apelo. El único modo de jugar una partida es jugarla. Lo que tu tía puede hacer por ti no tiene límites.

—¿Cuando llegue la ocasión de casarme? ¿A eso te refieres?

—Y ¿a qué iba a referirme si no? Encuentra un marido conveniente y…

—Y ¿luego? —preguntó Kate cuando su padre se interrumpió.

—Luego… en fin, volveré a hablarte. Restableceré las relaciones.

Ella miró a su alrededor y cogió la sombrilla.

—¿Porque no temes a nadie tanto como a ella? ¿Mi marido, si es que llego a casarme, no sería tan temible? Si es lo que insinúas, tal vez tengas razón. Pero ¿no depende también un poco de eso que tú llamas «un marido conveniente»? De todos modos —añadió mientras colocaba los flecos de la sombrilla—, ¿no irás a decirme que esperas que te convenza de que vengas a vivir con nosotros?

—No, cariño… ni mucho menos —lo dijo como si no le hubiesen ofendido ni el temor ni la esperanza que le atribuía; de hecho, admitió ambas acusaciones con una especie de alivio intelectual—. Dejo el asunto enteramente en manos de tu tía. Confío en ella a ciegas y aceptaré sin dudar al hombre que elija. Si, con lo esnob que es, a ella le parece bien, a mí también, y eso a pesar de que, sin duda, procurará buscar a uno de quien pueda estar segura de que va a ser desagradable conmigo. Mi único interés es que hagas lo que te pide. No conocerás esta pobreza tan espantosa —afirmó el señor Croy—, mientras esté en mi mano impedirlo.

—Pues adiós, papá —respondió la joven al cabo de un instante de reflexión que perceptiblemente la indujo a no seguir con la charla—. Por supuesto, te haces cargo de que tal vez sea para mucho tiempo.

Su interlocutor tuvo entonces una de sus más bellas inspiraciones.

—Y, francamente, ¿por qué no para siempre? Si tienes que hacerme justicia, admitirás que nunca hago, ni he hecho, las cosas a medias y, si te propongo borrarme de tu vida, será con la esponja fatídica bien humedecida y aún mejor aplicada.

Kate volvió su bello y sereno rostro hacia él con tanta parsimonia como si de verdad fuese la ultima vez.

—No sé a quién te pareces.

—Ni yo tampoco, cariño. Me he pasado la vida tratando en vano de averiguarlo. A nadie… y es una pena. Si hubiese otros como yo y nos hubiésemos conocido, quién sabe lo que podríamos haber logrado. Pero ahora da igual. Adiós, cariño. —Pareció dudar de si a ella le gustaría que se creyese con derecho a darle un beso, pero eso no le avergonzó lo más mínimo.

Ella se abstuvo de disipar sus dudas.

—Ojalá tuviéramos aquí a alguien que, llegado el caso, pudiese servir de testigo de que me he ofrecido a vivir contigo.

—¿Quieres que llame a la casera? —preguntó su padre.

—No me creerás —dijo Kate—, pero he venido con la esperanza de que dieses con alguna solución. En todo caso, siento mucho tener que dejarte enfermo. —Al oírla, el señor Croy se apartó y, como había hecho antes, se refugió al lado de ventana y se puso a mirar la calle—. Déjame añadir, por desgracia sin testigos —continuó su hija al cabo de un instante—, que basta con que digas una palabra.

Cuando respondió, su padre aún seguía de espaldas a ella.

—Si no te he dado la impresión de haberla dicho ya, es evidente que hemos perdido el tiempo.

—Me comprometeré a hacer con mi tía exactamente lo que quiere que haga contigo. Me ha pedido que elija. Pues bien, elegiré. Me lavaré las manos y la abandonaré por ti según sus propias condiciones.

Su padre se volvió por fin.

—¿Sabes, cariño, que me estás poniendo malo? He intentado ser claro, y no es justo.

Ella no hizo caso y exclamó con una sinceridad demasiado evidente:

—¡Padre!

—No sé qué te ocurre —dijo él—, pero, si no puedes dominarte, te doy mi palabra de que no me quedaré cruzado de brazos. Te meteré en un coche y te dejaré sana y salva en Lancaster Gate.

Kate estaba ausente y distante.

—¿Padre?

Aquello fue demasiado y el señor Croy respondió con sequedad.

—¿Y bien?

—Por raro que te parezca oírlo, hay un modo de que puedas ayudarme.

—¿No es eso exactamente lo que he intentado decirte?

—Sí —respondió ella con paciencia—, pero en el mal sentido. Te hablo con total sinceridad y sé lo que me digo. No fingiré que hace un mes no hubiera creído que podría llegar a necesitar tu ayuda y tu apoyo. Lo que pasa es que la situación ha cambiado, ahora me enfrento a otras dificultades. Pero incluso ahora no quiero pedirte que «hagas» nada. Sólo que no me rechaces y no te apartes de mi vida. Basta con que digas: «De acuerdo, si así lo quieres, nos quedaremos juntos. No nos angustiemos por adelantado con cómo o dónde, tengo fe y encontraré una manera». Nada más. Así es como podrías ayudarme. Te tendría a mi lado, y con eso saldría ganando. ¿Entiendes?

Si no lo entendió no fue porque no la mirase con atención.

—Lo que pasa es que estás enamorada, y que tu tía lo sabe y, por razones sin duda acertadas, lo rechaza y se opone. Y ¡hace muy bien! En eso me fío de ella con los ojos cerrados. Vete, por favor. —Aunque no parecía enfadado, sino más bien dominado por una infinita tristeza, la animó a marcharse. Antes de que Kate tuviera tiempo de responder, él había abierto la puerta para dejar claros sus sentimientos. No obstante, a pesar de su profundo disgusto, aún hizo gala de un poco de lástima y generosidad—: Lo siento por tu tía, pobre ilusa, si espera algo de ti.

Kate se quedó en el umbral.

—No es a quien más compadezco, porque, por muy ilusa que pueda ser, hay otros que lo son mucho más. Y estoy hablando —aclaró— de eso que llamas «esperar algo de mí».

Él respondió como si lo que acababa de decir significase algo distinto.

—Entonces ¿estás engañando a dos personas, a la señora Lowder y a alguien más?

Kate movió la cabeza con indiferencia.

—No es mi intención engañar a nadie y menos aún a la señora Lowder. Si me abandonas —dijo como si hablara para sus adentros—, al menos eso simplificará las cosas. Seguiré mi camino, como mejor me parezca.

—Y ¿seguir tu camino equivale a casarte con un don nadie sin un penique?

—Exiges mucho —observó ella— para lo poco que das.

De ese modo su hija volvió a demostrarle que no iba a dejarse intimidar; y, aunque la miró furioso un instante, hacía mucho que ése era en la práctica el límite de su capacidad de oponerse a ella.

—Si no has tenido reparo en disgustar a tu tía, te mereces oír lo que te estoy diciendo. ¿Cómo debo entender tus palabras, si no estás pensando en una persona totalmente inadecuada? ¿Quién es esa sabandija miserable? —preguntó al ver que ella no contestaba.

Su respuesta fue clara pero distante.

—Tiene hacia ti la mejor disposición. De hecho, lo único que quiere es ser amable contigo.

—Entonces ¡es que es idiota! Y ¿cómo se te ocurre pensar que podría verlo con mejores ojos —continuó su padre— porque sea pobre y un inútil? Incluso entre los idiotas los hay buenos y malos y pareces haberte esforzado en elegir a uno de los malos. Por suerte tu tía los conoce; como te he dicho, confío totalmente en su criterio, y te aseguro que no quiero ni oír hablar de nadie a quien ella haya rechazado. —Llegó así al

final de su discurso—. Y, si de verdad decides enfrentarte a los dos…

—¿Qué, papá?

—En fin, hija mía, creo que, aunque sea tan insignificante como cariñosamente crees, encontraré el modo de que lo lamentes.

Ella hizo una pausa, solemne, pero no como si estuviese calibrando ese peligro.

—Sabes que si decido no hacerlo no será porque te tenga miedo.

—¡Oh, en ese caso, puedes ser todo lo valiente que quieras!

—Entonces ¿no vas a hacer nada por mí?

En el rellano, en lo alto de la tortuosa escalera y entre aquel extraño olor que parecía aferrarse a ellos, su padre le demostró, y esta vez de manera inconfundible, lo vano de sus súplicas.

—Lo único que quiero es cumplir con mi deber; te he aconsejado de la manera mejor y más lúcida posible. —Y luego asomó el resorte que le impulsaba—. Si te disgusta, ve a que te consuele Marian.

Lo que no le perdonaba era que hubiese dividido con Marian la exigua parte de la herencia que les había dejado su madre. Habría querido que la repartiera con él.

II

Se había ido a vivir con la señora Lowder después de la muerte de su madre, y eso había supuesto una tensión y un esfuerzo tan dolorosos que, recordarlos, la llevaba a reflexionar sobre el largo camino recorrido desde entonces. No había podido hacer nada para evitarlo, en la otra casa no había ni un penique, sólo facturas impagadas que fueron amontonándose mientras su madre yacía mortalmente enferma, y la admonición de que no podía vender nada porque todo formaba parte de la «herencia». En qué acabaría quedando aquella herencia constituía un angustioso misterio; al final había dejado un saldo no tan pequeño como, al igual que su hermana, se había temido las últimas semanas; pero la joven había tenido al principio la desagradable sensación de que la custodiaban en nombre de Marian y sus hijos. ¿Qué demonios pensaban que iba a hacer con ella? En realidad únicamente quería renunciar, olvidar sus propios intereses, y sin duda lo habría hecho de no haber sido por la brusca intervención de la tía Maud. Ahora todas las intervenciones de ésta eran bruscas, y la otra cuestión, la verdaderamente importante, era si, en vista de eso, debía aceptarlo o rechazarlo todo. Sin embargo, al final del invierno, no habría sabido decir qué postura creía haber tomado. No sería la primera vez que se había visto obligada a aceptar con callada ironía una interpretación ajena de su conducta. A menudo terminaba aceptando —parecía la única manera de vivir— la versión que los demás juzgaran más conveniente.

La alta, opulenta e imponente mansión de Lancaster Gate, al otro lado del parque y de las inmensas extensiones de South Kensington, le habían parecido, en su infancia, en su juventud, el límite más remoto de su vago mundo. Quedaba fuera y era más esporádico que cualquier otra cosa en el círculo relativamente reducido en que se movía y, por una austeridad intuida desde muy pronto, daba la impresión de que sólo se podía llegar a él después de recorrer largas, rectas, desazonadoras perspectivas, calles como telescopios, cada vez más largas y más rectas, mientras todo lo demás quedaba reducido a los alrededores de Cromwell Road o, a lo sumo, al lado más próximo de Kensington Gardens. La señora Lowder era su única tía «de verdad», no la mujer de uno de sus tíos, y por tanto había sido, tanto al principio como cuando acontecieron sus mayores desdichas, la persona más indicada para intervenir; a pesar de lo cual nuestra joven tenía la impresión, sopesada a lo largo de los años, de que las intervenciones de su tía no habían estado a la altura de la situación. Era como si los principales oficios de aquella pariente con los jóvenes Croy —además de proporcionarles su cuota fija de grandeza social— hubiesen consistido en inculcarles la idea de lo que no podían esperar. Cuando Kate tuvo edad de recapacitar sobre semejante cuestión con pleno discernimiento, no acertó a imaginar cómo la tía Maud podría haber sido distinta y comprendió en cambio que muchas otras cosas sí podían haberlo sido; no obstante, también intuyó que, si habían vivido conscientemente expuestos al gélido aliento de *ultima Thule*, era porque, tal como estaban las cosas, no tenían otra opción. Lo que parecía claro era que la señora Lowder no les tenía tanta antipatía como imaginaban. En todo caso, para demostrar que luchaba contra dicha aversión, iba a veces a visitarlos, los invitaba de cuando en cuando a su casa y, en suma, tal como se veía ahora, se relacionaba con ellos de la mejor manera para que su hermana tuviese el perenne lujo de sentirse afrentada. La joven sabía que la pobre señora Croy siempre había juzgado a su hermana con resentimiento y los había educado, a Marian, a los chicos y también a ella, con la idea de una actitud concreta, que los había conducido a vigilarse unos a otros con temor para asegurarse de que la estaban poniendo en práctica. Tal actitud consistía en demostrarle a la tía Maud, con la misma regularidad con que ella los invitaba, que se bastaban —muchas gracias— ellos solos. Aunque Kate llegó a comprender que la razón era únicamente que ella no les bastaba a ellos. Lo poco que les ofrecía debía ser aceptado bajo protesta, pero no porque en realidad fuese excesivo. Era una ofensa —y ¡ahí estaba el problema!— porque era poca cosa.

La de cosas nuevas que veía nuestra joven señorita desde la alta y soleada ventana que daba al parque, tantas que (aunque algunas no eran más que lo mismo de siempre modificado y, como se decía en otros

casos, acicalado) la vida adquiría cada vez más, semana tras semana, el rostro de un apuesto y distinguido desconocido. Ya no era joven —pues le parecía que a los veinticinco años era ya tarde para recapacitar—, y la sensación que la embargaba era un tipo de remordimiento que nunca había conocido. El mundo era diferente —para bien o para mal— de lo que le habían contado sus escasas lecturas y tenía la impresión de haber perdido el tiempo. De haberlo sabido podría haberse preparado para enfrentarse mejor a él. En cualquier caso, todos los días hacía algún descubrimiento, unas veces sobre sí misma y otras sobre los demás. En particular dos de ellos —uno de cada clase— se turnaban para inquietarla. Reparó, como no había reparado nunca, en lo mucho que la atraían las cosas materiales. Comprendió, y se ruborizó avergonzada al comprenderlo, que si, a diferencia de lo que le ocurría antes, la vida le parecía un vestido bien arreglado, era por los adornos, las puntillas, las cintas, la seda y el terciopelo. La alarmaba ser tan accesible a ese tipo de placeres. Le encantaban las lujosas habitaciones que le había asignado su tía, le gustaban literalmente más de lo que le había gustado nunca ninguna otra cosa; y nada podría haberla inquietado más que la sospecha de que su pariente había comprendido esa verdad. Su tía era prodigiosa: nunca le había hecho justicia. Esas generosas condiciones le recordaban a ella todo el tiempo, de la mañana a la noche; pero era una persona a quien cuanto más conocías, por extraño que pudiera parecer, más te daba la sensación de tener el corazón en un puño.

El segundo descubrimiento fue que, lejos de tener poca importancia para la señora Lowder, el hogar roto de Lexham Gardens la había obsesionado día y noche. Todo el invierno Kate había pasado horas de observación, que no por solitarias habían sido menos agudas; los recientes acontecimientos le garantizaban cierto aislamiento, explicado por el luto, y era en ese aislamiento donde más se hacía notar la influencia de su tía. Incluso en la distancia, sentada allí abajo, la tía Maud seguía siendo una presencia capaz de ejercer una considerable presión sobre su sensible sobrina, que comprendía ahora que hacía mucho que había sido escogida. Sabía más de lo que podría haber contado al lado de la chimenea del piso de arriba en una oscura tarde de diciembre. Sabía tanto que casi era lo que la retenía allí y lo que la hacía ir y venir del pequeño sofá tapizado de seda de delante de la chimenea al enorme y grisáceo mapa de Middlesex que se extendía ante su vista. Bajar, abandonar su refugio, equivalía a toparse a mitad de camino con alguno de sus descubrimientos y tener que hacerles frente o huir de ellos, mientras que, desde tales alturas, eran como el rumor de un asedio lejano que llegase hasta una ciudadela bien aprovisionada. Esas semanas casi había llegado a gustarle la causa de tanta tensión e incertidumbre: la muerte de su madre, el hundimiento de su padre, el desconsuelo de su hermana, la confirmación de sus limitadas perspectivas, la certeza en particular de tener que admitir que si actuaba, como decía ella, decentemente (es decir, si hacía, a pesar de todo, algo por los demás) se quedaría sin nada. Se decía que tenía derecho a la tristeza y al silencio, y los cultivaba por su poder dilatorio. De este modo podía posponer una rendición, aunque aún no sabía con exactitud a qué: una rendición incondicional (así la concebía en ocasiones) a la ominosa personalidad de la tía Maud. Era esa personalidad lo que la hacía tan prodigiosa y, si le parecía amenazante, era porque, en el aire espeso y neblinoso de su existencia concertada, había sin duda partes magnificadas y partes ciertamente desdibujadas. En todos los casos, tanto lo borroso como lo claro representaban una voluntad fuerte y una mano firme. Kate sabía muy bien que podía ser devorada, y se comparaba a un cabritillo tembloroso al que guardaran apartado un par de días hasta que llegase su hora, pero al que antes o después acabarían echando a la jaula de la leona.

La jaula era la propia habitación de la tía Maud, la oficina donde llevaba las cuentas, su campo de batalla y, en suma, el particular escenario en el que actuaba; estaba en la planta baja, daba al vestíbulo principal y a nuestra joven le recordaba la garita de un centinela o un puesto de peaje. La leona esperaba, o al menos eso intuía el cabritillo, consciente de que no muy lejos había un bocado tierno. Entretanto habría sido una leona maravillosa para exhibirla en una jaula o en cualquier otro sitio, una figura extraordinaria, majestuosa, magnífica, de colores vivos, lustrosa y brillante, siempre satinada, cubierta de abalorios centelleantes y gemas resplandecientes, con brillantes ojos de ágata, una melena negra como ala de cuervo y la piel tan tersa —como si estuviese demasiado estirada— que parecía porcelana bien cuidada, sobre todo en las curvas y los pliegues. Su sobrina le había puesto en secreto un mote que no le había dicho a nadie: cuando se dejaba llevar por su fantasía le parecía típicamente insular y la imaginaba como la Britania de la Plaza del Mercado, una Britania inconfundible, pero con una pluma detrás de la oreja, y sabía que no descansaría hasta que tuviese ocasión de añadir a la panoplia un casco, un escudo, un tridente y un libro mayor. No obstante, lo cierto era que las fuerzas con las que Kate tendría que enfrentarse no eran las que daba a entender una imagen clara y sencilla; a fin de cuentas, estaba aprendiendo a conocer a su pariente día a día y había comprendido ya el error de confiar en fáciles analogías. Había una faceta de Britania, la de su florido fariseísmo, sus plumas y su séquito, sus muebles barrocos y su pecho palpitante, los falsos dioses

de su gusto y las notas falsas de su conversación, cuya sola contemplación podía ser peligrosamente engañosa. Era una Britania compleja y sutil, tan vehemente como práctica, y el ridículo donde guardaba sus prejuicios era tan profundo como ese otro bolsillo lleno de monedas acuñadas con su imagen por las que era más conocida. Llevaba a cabo, en suma, detrás de su frente agresivo y defensivo, diversas operaciones decididas por su sabiduría. De hecho, ya hemos insinuado que nuestra joven señorita la veía desde su ciudadela aprovisionada ante todo como una asaltante, y lo que la hacía más temible en ese papel era su inmoralidad y su falta de escrúpulos. Así era, en cualquier caso, como la imaginaba Kate con despreocupación juvenil en aquellas sesiones silenciosas, y dicha imagen representaba suficientemente que su peso se sumaba en la balanza a ciertos peligros, que, como hemos dicho, impulsaban a la joven a ocultarse en la primera planta mientras su tía, a la vez combativa y diplomática, ganaba el mayor terreno posible. Sin embargo, ¿cuáles eran, al fin y al cabo, esos peligros, sino los peligros de la vida y de Londres? La señora Lowder era Londres, era la vida, el ruido del asedio y el fragor del combate. Después de todo, Britania también temía algunas cosas, pero la tía Maud no temía nada, ni siquiera, daba la impresión, los más sesudos pensamientos.

No obstante, Kate guardaba para sí esas impresiones hasta el punto de que apenas las compartía con la pobre Marian, a pesar de que la razón ostensible de sus frecuentes visitas fuese hablar de todo con ella. Una de las razones que la impulsaban a resistirse a la última concesión a la tía Maud era que podría ser más libre para dedicarse a esa otra pariente mucho más cercana, y mucho menos afortunada, con quien la tía Maud no quería tener casi nada que ver. El mayor inconveniente de su situación, entretanto, era precisamente que cualquier relación con su hermana tenía el efecto de acobardarla y atarle las manos, y de recordarle además a diario el papel, no siempre inspirado o reconfortante, que pueden desempeñar en la vida los vínculos de sangre. Ahora tenía enfrente tales vínculos y le parecía haber cobrado una conciencia más clara de ellos tras la muerte de su madre, a pesar de que ésta se había llevado consigo la mayor parte. Su padre obsesivo y agobiante, su tía amenazadora e intransigente y sus sobrinas y sobrinos sin un penique hacían vibrar de forma excesiva la cuerda de su piedad familiar. Su manera de formularlo —sobre todo con respecto a Marian— era que veía hasta dónde podía llevarte el cultivo de la consanguineidad. Según creía, había podido comprobar el peso de semejante carga en otro tiempo, en los días en que, al ser la pequeña, ninguna otra persona en el mundo le había parecido tan hermosa como Marian, ni más encantadora, inteligente y merecedora del éxito y la felicidad. Ahora las cosas habían cambiado, pero por muchas razones se había visto obligada a adoptar la misma actitud. El objeto de su admiración había dejado de ser hermoso y las razones para pensar que era inteligente ya no estaban tan claras; sin embargo, viuda, despechada, desanimada y resentida, seguía siendo su hermana mayor. La sensación que tenía Kate era que siempre la obligaba a algo; y, cada vez que iba al triste barrio de Chelsea, al llegar a la puerta de la casita cuyo reducido alquiler no podía quitarse de la cabeza, se preguntaba con fatalismo de qué se trataría en esa ocasión. Reparaba con agudeza en que el desencanto volvía egoísta a la gente, se maravillaba de la calma —a la pobre mujer sólo le quedaba eso— con que Marian daba por sentado ciertas cosas, como que, por el hecho de ser la pequeña, debía someterse y desempeñar para siempre el papel de hermana. Desde ese punto de vista, Kate existía sólo para la casita de Chelsea, y la moraleja, por supuesto, era que cuanto más te entregabas en menos te quedabas. Siempre había gente dispuesta a aprovecharse de ti que no se paraba a pensar que te estaba devorando: lo hacía sin darse cuenta siquiera.

No había mayor desdicha, o al menos mayor desconsuelo, razonaba además, que estar hecha a la vez para ser y para ver. Siempre veías, en ese caso, algo distinto de lo que eras y en consecuencia nada de la paz de tu situación. No obstante, como a Marian nunca la dejaba ver cómo era, tal vez no se hubiese percatado de que ella también veía. Desde su posición, Kate no era hipócrita porque fingiese ser virtuosa, porque se entregara de verdad, sino porque fingía ser estúpida, ya que ocultaba cómo era en realidad. Lo que más disimulaba Kate era la particular desazón que le producía comprobar que su hermana hacía instintivamente todo lo posible para someterla a su tía; un estado del espíritu que ante todo subrayaba lo pobre que se puede llegar a ser cuando te obsesiona la falta de dinero. Kate era sólo un medio para llegar a la tía Maud y lo de menos era lo que pudiera ocurrirle a ella. En una palabra, debía quemar sus naves en beneficio de Marian, quien por su parte estaba dispuesta a olvidar una dignidad que tenía motivos, aunque a ella eso le trajera sin cuidado, para ser un poco más estricta. De modo que, si hubiese querido ser estricta por las dos, Kate habría tenido que actuar de forma egoísta y preferir determinado ideal de comportamiento —egoísta donde los haya— a la posibilidad de conseguir unas migajas para las cuatro criaturas. La indignación que le había causado a la señora Lowder la boda de su sobrina mayor con el señor Condrip apenas había disminuido; el fatuo comportamiento del señor Condrip, el cura de gesto santurrón de una triste parroquia de las afueras, había sido tan notorio que no se habían suavizado las críticas. Había

adoptado por sistema aquel gesto porque Dios sabía que no tenía otra cosa que ofrecer, nada con lo que enfrentarse al mundo, y ni siquiera concebía el decoro de vivir y ocuparse de sus propios asuntos. Por parte de la tía Maud las críticas no se habían aplacado porque no era de las que disculpan algo semejante sólo porque haya adquirido el privilegio del patetismo. No estaba dispuesta a perdonar y el único intento que hizo de olvidar fue dejar de lado —además de a la delincuente superviviente— a la pequeña y compacta falange en que se habían convertido los Condrip. De las dos sórdidas ceremonias que ella había metido en el mismo saco, la boda y el entierro, sólo había asistido a la primera, y antes había enviado a Marian un generoso cheque, pero eso no había representado para ella más que la sombra de la admisión de un vínculo con la vida de la señora Condrip. Le disgustaban tanto los niños ruidosos y sin futuro como las viudas llorosas e incapaces de enmendar sus errores; y había puesto así al alcance de Marian uno de los pocos lujos que le quedaban, ahora que todo lo demás había desaparecido: una excusa para sentirse constantemente agraviada. Kate Croy recordaba bien lo que había hecho su madre en una situación parecida y el fracaso de Marian consistía en no haber sabido arrancar el fruto del resentimiento que las obligaba, en tanto que hermanas, a una especie de camaradería en la abyección. Si la teoría era que ¡ay!, una de las dos había dejado de ser visible pero la otra seguía siendo lo bastante visible para compensarlo, ¿cómo no reparar en que Kate no podía abandonar a su hermana sin ser cruel y orgullosa? Esta lección se hizo aún más evidente para nuestra joven señorita al día siguiente de la conversación con su padre.

—No entiendo —le dijo en esa ocasión Marian— cómo puedes pensar en otra cosa que no sea la horrible situación en que nos encontramos.

—Y ¿qué sabes tú —preguntó a su vez Kate— lo que pienso o dejo de pensar? Creo haberte demostrado de sobra lo mucho que me preocupo por vosotros. No sé a qué otra cosa te puedes referir.

La réplica de Marian fue un golpe que había preparado de varias maneras pero que no obstante tuvo un no sé qué de inesperado en su precipitación. Kate había intuido los vagos temores de su hermana, pero aquí, ominosamente, asomaba uno concreto.

—Bueno, por supuesto tus asuntos son sólo cosa tuya, y podrás decir que no hay nadie menos indicado que yo para venirte con sermones. Pero, de todos modos, si decides lavarte las manos y abandonarme para siempre, no me callaré, por esta vez, que no creo que tengas derecho, dada nuestra situación, a echar tu vida por la borda.

Fue después de la cena de los niños, que era también la de la madre, y que la tía conseguía eludir casi siempre; y las dos jóvenes seguían delante del mantel arrugado, entre baberos, platos rebañados y el persistente olor a comida hervida. Kate había preguntado, con mucha ceremonia, si podía abrir un poco la ventana, y la señora Condrip había respondido, sin ninguna, que hiciese lo que quisiera. A menudo se tomaba esas preguntas como si reflejaran en cierto sentido la pura esencia de sus hijos. Los cuatro se habían retirado, con mucho ruido y ajetreo, bajo la imperfecta vigilancia de la diminuta institutriz irlandesa que les había buscado su tía y cuya sombría resolución de no prolongar semejante martirio era cada vez más evidente. La madre de los niños se había convertido para Kate —que lo tomaba sólo por un efecto de la maternidad— en alguien muy distinto a la dulce Marian del pasado: la viuda del señor Condrip oscurecía por completo aquella imagen. Era poco más que un vestigio andrajoso, un sencillo y prosaico resultado de su marido, como si hubiese pasado por él, igual que por un estrecho embudo, y hubiese salido arrugada, inútil y sin nada más que lo que él representaba. Se había vuelto colorada y casi gorda, dos síntomas de duelo que no eran muy apropiados; cada vez se parecía menos a los Croy, sobre todo a los Croy cuando pasaban apuros, y más a las dos hermanas solteras de su marido, que, en opinión de Kate, iban a verla demasiado a menudo y se quedaban demasiado tiempo, con el consiguiente gasto de té y mantequilla, sobre el cual Kate, a quien no dejaban indiferente las facturas de los tenderos, tenía su propia opinión. Además, Marian era muy quisquillosa con sus cuñadas, y a su pariente más próxima, que veía y ponderaba mejor las cosas, le parecía una rareza que se tomase por lo personal cualquier observación que hiciese sobre ellas. Si ésa era la consecuencia inevitable del matrimonio, Kate Croy habría cuestionado semejante institución. En cualquier caso, era un ejemplo muy claro de lo que un hombre —¡sobre todo un hombre así!— podía hacerle a una mujer. Veía cómo las dos Condrip apremiaban a la viuda de su hermano a propósito de la tía Maud, que al fin y al cabo ni siquiera era tía suya, la empujaban, mientras bebían interminables tazas de té, a charlar e incluso a jactarse de la casa de Lancaster Gate y la volvían más vulgar de lo que parecía escrito que pudiera llegar a ser ningún Croy. Insistían, una y otra vez, en que no había que perder de vista Lancaster Gate, y en que debía ser Kate la encargada de conseguirlo; de este modo, curiosa, o más bien tristemente, nuestra joven estaba segura de ser el objeto de sus comentarios pese a que jamás habrían consentido que fuera ella quien hablase de ellas. Y lo peor del caso era que Marian no las quería. Pero eran Condrip, habían crecido cerca de él, eran casi como Bertie, Maudie, Kitty y Guy. Le hablaban del difunto,

cosa que Kate nunca hacía, por lo que tenía que limitarse a escuchar en silencio. De hecho, no dejaba de repetirse que si ésos eran los efectos del matrimonio… Cualquiera podría adivinar, por tanto, que la advertencia de Marian cayó bajo la luz irónica de esas reservas.

—No veo —respondió— dónde en particular está ese peligro que crees que me amenaza. Te aseguro que no tengo la menor intención de echar nada por la borda. Mi sensación es que ya me habéis obligado a echar demasiado.

—¿Vas a decirme que no te gustaría casarte con Merton Densher? —Marian puso las cartas sobre la mesa.

Kate tardó un momento en responder a la pregunta.

—¿Crees que si ésa fuese mi intención estaría obligada a advertirte antes, para que pudieras entrometerte e impedirlo? ¿De verdad lo crees? —preguntó la joven. Luego, al ver que su hermana también hacía una pausa, añadió—: No sé a qué viene hablar ahora del señor Densher.

—Si hablo de él es porque tú no lo haces. Jamás pronuncias su nombre, a pesar de lo que sé… Por eso he pensado en él. O más bien en ti. Si a estas alturas no sabes lo que espero, lo que sueño… por el afecto que te tengo, es inútil intentar explicártelo. —Pero Marian se había acalorado y Kate estuvo segura de que había hablado del señor Densher con las señoritas Condrip—. Imagino que, si he sacado a colación a esa persona, es porque le tengo mucho miedo. Si de verdad quieres saberlo me aterra. De hecho, me inspira tanta antipatía como temor.

—Y aun así ¿no crees peligroso insultarle en mi presencia?

—Sí —confesó la señora Condrip—; pero ¿cómo hablar de él de otra manera? Admito que no tendría que hacerlo. Pero, como acabo de decirte, quiero que lo sepas.

—¿Que sepa qué?

—Que me parecería con mucho —replicó Marian— lo peor que pudiera pasarnos.

—¿Porque no tiene dinero?

—Sí, eso por una parte. Y también porque no confío en él.

Kate se mostró cortés, pero respondió con indiferencia.

—¿En qué no confías?

—En que llegue a tenerlo algún día. Y tú tienes que tener dinero. Y lo tendrás.

—¿Para dártelo a ti?

Marian respondió con una celeridad que casi sonó impertinente.

—En primer lugar para tenerlo. Para, en todo caso, no seguir sin un penique. Luego ya veremos.

—¡Claro que lo veremos! —exclamó Kate Croy. Detestaba esa forma de hablar, pero ¿qué podía hacer si Marian optaba por ser vulgar? Pensó con renovada aversión en las señoritas Condrip—. Me hace gracia cómo lo dispones todo y das las cosas por sentadas. Si tan fácil es casarse con hombres deseosos de que malgastemos su dinero, no sé por qué no lo hacemos todas. Pero yo no conozco a muchos, ni veo por qué iba a interesarles. Vives —añadió— en un mundo de ilusiones.

—No tanto como tú, Kate, porque yo veo lo que veo y no puedes escabullirte sin más. —La hermana mayor hizo una pausa lo bastante larga para que en el rostro de la pequeña se dibujara, a pesar de su superioridad, la aprensión—. No estoy hablando de cualquier hombre, sino del que proponga la tía Maud, ni de cualquier dinero, sino, si quieres formularlo así, del de la tía Maud. Lo único que digo es que hagas lo que ella quiere. Te equivocas si crees que quiero algo de ti; sólo quiero lo mismo que ella. ¡Con eso me basta! —A Kate le pareció horrible el tono con que lo dijo—. Tal vez no crea en Merton Densher, pero al menos creo en la señora Lowder.

—Tus ideas son de lo más sorprendente —replicó Kate—, sobre todo porque coinciden con las de papá. A lo mejor te interesa saber que ayer mismo me las expuso con toda la inspiración que puedes imaginar…

Quedó claro que sí le interesaba.

—¿Ha ido a verte?

—No, fui yo a su casa.

—¿De verdad? —quiso saber Marian—. ¿Con qué propósito?

—Para decirle que estoy dispuesta a irme a vivir con él.

Marian la miró con fijeza.

—¿Dispuesta a dejar a la tía Maud…?

—Por mi padre, sí.

La pobre señora Condrip se había congestionado de horror.

—¿Estás dispuesta…?

—Eso le dije. Es lo menos que podía hacer.

—Y, dime, ¿podías hacer más? —replicó Marian con la voz entrecortada por el disgusto—. ¿Qué es él para nosotras? Y ¡me lo dices así, como si tal cosa!

Se miraron a la cara, Marian tenía los ojos llenos de lágrimas. Kate los observó un momento y luego dijo:

—Lo había meditado mucho… una y otra vez. Pero no tienes por qué ofenderte. No me voy. No me quiso.

Su hermana seguía jadeando… Aún tardó un tiempo en calmarse.

—Bueno, yo tampoco te habría querido… Te aseguro que, si su respuesta hubiese sido otra, me habría negado a recibirte. Y me ofende que hayas tenido esas intenciones. Si te hubieses ido con papá, tendrías que haber dejado de venir por aquí. —Marian lo dijo, de manera indefinible, como si la imagen de semejante privación pudiera intimidar a su hermana. Le gustaba proferir esas amenazas que creía magistrales—. Pero al menos ha sido listo al decirte que no.

Marian siempre había tenido las ideas muy claras sobre eso de ser listo; como se decía su hermana para sus adentros, se le daba muy bien. Por suerte Kate tenía dónde refugiarse contra su irritación.

—Me dijo que no —repitió sin más—. Pero, al igual que tú, cree en la tía Maud. Me amenazó con maldecirme si la dejaba.

—Y ¿no lo harás? —Como al principio la joven no dijo nada, su hermana insistió—: ¿No lo harás, verdad? Ya veo que no. Pero, aun así, no entiendo por qué no puedo insistir para que comprendas la verdad de una vez. La verdad, cariño, de tu deber. ¿Nunca te has parado a pensarlo? Es tu mayor deber.

—Y vuelta con lo mismo —se rio Kate—. Papá también insistió en que era mi deber.

—¡Oh!, no quiero ser pesada, pero creo saber más que tú de la vida, tal vez más que nuestro padre. —En ese momento, y a pesar de todo, Marian pareció ver al personaje bajo la luz de una ironía más amable—. ¡Pobre papá!

Lo dijo con la misma gazmoñería que Kate había detectado más de una vez en sus: «¡La pobre tía Maud!». Esas cosas le asqueaban y se dispuso a marcharse. Una vez más, llevaban la marca de la abyección; era difícil decidir cuál de las personas implicadas había demostrado mejor lo poco que la querían. La joven se propuso, no obstante, no seguir discutiendo y se convenció de haberlo logrado en los diez minutos que, para no irse sin más, dejó pasar antes de poder retirarse con un mínimo de elegancia. Sin embargo, en ese momento reparó en que Marian seguía sermoneándola y en que había dicho algo a lo que no le quedó más remedio que responder.

—¿A quién te refieres con «el joven de la tía Maud»?

—¿A quién va a ser sino a lord Mark?

—Y ¿de dónde sacas esas tonterías vulgares? —preguntó Kate con gesto tranquilo—. ¿Cómo llegan esas habladurías a este agujero?

Nada más decirlo se preguntó qué había sido de la elegancia por la que se había sacrificado. Marian desde luego no hacía nada por salvaguardarla, y sin duda su queja no podía ser menos consecuente. Quería que «se trabajase» Lancaster Gate, pues estaba convencida de que aquel lugar de abundancia podía trabajarse, pero no entendía por qué aprovechaba semejante vínculo para afrentar su humilde hogar. De hecho pareció llegar a la conclusión de que si seguía en aquel «agujero» era por culpa de Kate, que encima la criticaba sin piedad por vivir en él. No obstante, no le aclaró, como le había pedido, de qué manera había llegado a sus oídos aquel rumor, así que su hermana no tuvo más remedio que interpretarlo, una vez más, como un indicio de la insidiosa curiosidad de las señoritas Condrip. Vivían en un agujero más profundo que Marian, pero pegaban el oído al suelo, y se pasaban el día merodeando, mientras que Marian, con una ropa y unos zapatos que cada día parecían más grandes y holgados, nunca salía a merodear. Había veces en que Kate se preguntaba si el destino no habría enviado a las señoritas Condrip para advertirla sobre su propio futuro y mostrarle en qué podría convertirse al llegar a los cuarenta, si dejaba sin más que las cosas siguieran su curso. De todos modos, tal vez no hiciese falta esperar mucho para que lo que tanta gente esperaba de ella dejase de tener gracia. No sólo debía romper con Merton Densher para contentar a cinco espectadores (contando a las señoritas Condrip), sino también correr en persecución de lord Mark en nombre de la ridícula teoría de que el triunfo estaba ligado a una recompensa. Dicha recompensa la había establecido la mano de la señora Lowder y aguardaba al final del camino como una campanilla que, en cuanto la tocara, desencadenaría el clamor de la multitud. Kate argumentó con perspicacia sobre los puntos débiles de aquella ingenua ficción, con el efecto de que consiguió zarandear la confianza de su hermana; aunque la señora Condrip continuó refugiándose en la excusa —que era, a fin de cuentas, la clave del asunto— de que su tía sería generosa si la contentaba. La identidad exacta del candidato no era más que un detalle: lo esencial era el «partido» que podría encontrar con su ayuda su sobrina. Marian siempre llamaba

«partidos» a los candidatos al matrimonio, pero eso volvía a ser sólo un detalle. Entretanto, la «ayuda» de la señora Lowder las esperaba: si no para iluminar el camino hasta lord Mark, entonces hasta alguien mejor. Marian, en suma, estaba dispuesta a conformarse con alguien mejor, pero no con alguien peor. Kate tuvo que volver a oír todo eso antes de encontrar una salida digna. El precio fue sacrificar al señor Densher a cambio de reducir a lord Mark al absurdo. Sólo así se despidieron sin rencor. Marian no volvería a hablarle de lord Mark, a condición de que ella prometiera no trabar relación con nadie a escondidas. Había renunciado a todo y a todos, pensó Kate al salir, lo cual era un alivio, pero también dejaba en suspenso su futuro. Y la aridez de semejante perspectiva hacía que tuviese ya algo en común con las señoritas Condrip.

Libro II

I

Merton Densher, que pasaba la mayor parte de las noches en la oficina de su periódico, disfrutaba a veces, para compensar, durante el día, de la sensación, o al menos de cierta apariencia, de ociosidad, por lo que no era raro encontrarlo en distintas partes de la ciudad cuando los hombres de negocios están ocultos a los ojos del mundo. Más de una vez a finales de ese invierno, había ido, hacia las tres o las cuatro de la tarde, a Kensington Gardens, donde se le había podido ver, en cada ocasión, comportarse como quien no tiene nada que hacer. Por lo general se encaminaba con cierta decisión hacia el lado norte, pero, una vez allí, su conducta era bastante incomprensible. Deambulaba aparentemente al azar por las alamedas; se detenía sin motivo y se quedaba contemplativo y ocioso; se sentaba en una silla y luego cambiaba a un banco; tras lo cual echaba otra vez a andar, sólo para repetir tanto la vaguedad como la vivacidad. Estaba claro que era un hombre sin nada que hacer o con muchas cosas en las que pensar; y era innegable que la impresión que producía hacía que la carga de la prueba recayera sobre él. Parte de la culpa la tenían su apariencia y sus rasgos personales, que hacían muy difícil identificar su profesión.

Era un joven inglés bastante alto, rubio y delgado, no del todo imposible de encasillar en ciertos detalles, como por ejemplo que era un caballero, y más concretamente uno educado, correcto y cortés, aunque, sin llegar a ser extraordinario o anormal, no acababa de revelar sus cartas al observador. Era joven para la Cámara de los Comunes y desgarbado para el ejército. Podría decirse que era demasiado refinado para la City y, a pesar del corte de su traje, demasiado escéptico para la iglesia. Por otro lado, era demasiado crédulo para la diplomacia, y tal vez incluso para la ciencia, y, al mismo tiempo, demasiado sensato para la poesía y no lo bastante para las artes plásticas. Podías creer estar acercándote a él al identificar en sus ojos el potencial para reconocer ideas, pero volverías a alejarte al preguntarte por dichas ideas. Lo malo de Densher era que parecía distraído pero no débil, ocioso pero no superficial. Tal vez fuese por la circunstancia de sus largas piernas, que tendían a extenderse, por el cabello lacio, no siempre bien peinado, y por la bien conformada cabeza que echaba atrás, en el momento más inesperado, sobre las manos entrelazadas, para entrar en períodos de desmedida comunión con el techo, las copas de los árboles, el cielo. Era, en suma, distraído, de una inteligencia irregular, capaz de dejar lo que tenía cerca para ocuparse de lo que estaba lejos y, por lo general, más dado a criticar las costumbres que a respetarlas. No obstante, evocaba, por encima de todo, ese maravilloso estado de la juventud en que los elementos, los metales más o menos preciosos, se hallan en tal estado de fusión y fermentación que el proceso de estampa final, la presión que fija el valor, debe esperar a que se produzca un relativo enfriamiento. Y la marca de esa mezcolanza tan interesante era que su irritabilidad obedecía a una ley muy sutil, que, aunque no fuera fácil, convenía conocer a la perfección para relacionarse con él. Y uno de cuyos efectos era que tenía sorprendentes reservas tanto de tolerancia como de mal genio.

Vagaba, en las mejores horas de los días templados, y en las múltiples ocasiones a las que hemos aludido, por la parte de los jardines más próxima a Lancaster Gate y, cada vez que, a la hora convenida, Kate Croy salía de casa de su tía, cruzaba la calle y entraba por la entrada más cercana, su desenvoltura prestaba un matiz ligeramente anómalo a su comportamiento. Si el encuentro hubiese sido franco y libre podría haber ocurrido en la casa; si hubiese tenido que ser discreto o secreto, cualquier sitio habría sido mejor que al pie de las ventanas de la señora Lowder. De hecho, no se demoraban mucho en aquel lugar; paseaban, caminaban, y recorrían grandes distancias en el curso de sus frecuentes conversaciones, o bien elegían un par de sillas al pie de uno de los grandes árboles y se sentaban lo más lejos posible de los demás. Pero en cada ocasión Kate daba al principio la impresión de querer exponerse, por así decirlo, a la caza y captura. Quería dejar claro que no era vulgar ni solapada, que los jardines eran deliciosos en sí mismos y disfrutar de ellos una cuestión de buen gusto; y que, si su tía decidía espiarla desde el salón o mandar que la siguieran y acecharan, estaba dispuesta a ponerle las cosas fáciles. Lo cierto era que la relación entre estos

dos jóvenes abundaba en esas peculiaridades que muy bien podrían simbolizar esas citas que tienen mucha más apariencia que motivo. Ya tendremos tiempo de comprobar la fuerza del lazo que les unía, pero era muy evidente que, si se había presentado la gran ocasión, había sido, de manera excepcional, bajo los auspicios de la famosa ley de los contrarios. Cualquier profunda armonía que pudiera llegar a gobernarlos no sería el resultado de lo mucho que tenían en común, pues lo único que compartían era su afecto, y encontraría en cambio su explicación, en cierto sentido, en que cada cual era pobre allí donde el otro era rico. No es nada nuevo que las personas jóvenes y generosas admiren más que ninguna otra cosa aquello que la naturaleza les ha negado… de lo que podría deducirse, en fin, que nuestros dos amigos eran generosos.

Merton Densher no hacía más que repetirse desde hacía mucho tiempo que sería un idiota si no se casaba con una mujer cuyas virtudes fuesen determinadas cualidades distintas de las suyas; y Kate Croy, aunque no había filosofado tanto, reconoció enseguida en el joven una preciosa diferencia. Representaba lo que la vida no le había dado y lo que, desde luego, nunca le daría sin la ayuda de alguien como él: las cosas vagas y elevadas que para ella pertenecían al mundo del espíritu. Densher le parecía rico, fuerte y misterioso en esa faceta, y le había hecho en especial el inmenso favor de convertir este elemento en algo concreto. Toda su vida había tenido que darlo por supuesto, pero nunca había encontrado a nadie que pudiera ofrecer un testimonio directo. Habían llegado hasta ella vagos rumores de su existencia; pero, en conjunto, todo parecía indicar que viviría y moriría sin tener ocasión de comprobarlo. La ocasión había llegado —fue algo extraordinario— el mismo día que conoció a Densher; y en honor de la joven hay que reconocer que supo en el acto en presencia de lo que se hallaba. Tal oportunidad, de hecho, merecía ser memorable por todo lo que floreció enseguida a partir de ella; la sensibilidad de Densher se unió a la de la joven y estuvo a la altura de su propio reconocimiento. Después de haber llegado tantas veces a la conclusión de que tenía cierta debilidad, como él la llamaba, a la hora de enfrentarse a la vida —pues su fuerte era el pensamiento—, opinaba, como es lógico, que era la vida lo que debía de algún modo anexionarse y poseer. Era ésta una necesidad tan grande que, pensada por sí misma, sólo conducía al vacío; era del aire inmediato de la vida de donde debía sacar su aliento. Así que el joven, ingenioso pero receptivo, crítico pero también ardiente, comprendió su caso y el de Kate Croy. Se habían visto por primera vez antes de la muerte de la madre de Kate, y la ocasión fue para ella el último placer que le permitió el inminente suceso; después los meses oscuros interpusieron una pantalla y, al menos para Kate, juntaron el final con el principio.

El principio —que ella recordaba con frecuencia— había sido una escena de inigualable brillantez para nuestra joven: una fiesta dada en una «galería» alquilada por una anfitriona que siempre hacía las cosas a lo grande. Un bailarín español, considerado en aquel momento la atracción de la ciudad; un poeta norteamericano, orgullo de un pueblo hermano, y un violinista húngaro que fascinaba al mundo entero; el nombre de éstas y otras atracciones había convocado generosamente a mucha gente entre la que —por un raro privilegio— se encontraba Kate. Llevaba, pensaba ella, una oscura existencia bajo el techo de su madre, y conocía a muy pocas personas que recibieran a semejante escala; pero había tenido trato con dos o tres que, al parecer, estaban relacionadas con ellas, dos o tres personas a través de las cuales la corriente de la hospitalidad, filtrada o difusa, podía extenderse de vez en cuando hasta candidatos más remotos. El caso es que una señora muy amable, amiga de su madre y emparentada con la dueña de la galería, se había ofrecido a llevarla a la fiesta y además le había presentado a varias personas de esas que, en las grandes veladas, siempre conducen a otras cosas, y que, en esta ocasión, culminaron en una conversación con un joven alto, rubio, un poco despeinado y más bien desgarbado, pero nada aburrido, que le había parecido distraído —él mismo reconoció que estaba en las nubes—, y más fuera de lugar que ningún otro invitado; lo más probable era que estuviese pensando en huir cuando le pararon para presentársela. De hecho, esa misma noche le confesó que conocerla había sido lo único que le había impedido marcharse, y que luego había comprendido lo mucho que habría lamentado hacerlo. A ese punto habían llegado a medianoche y, aunque en semejantes comentarios todo depende del tono, a medianoche el tono ya estaba ahí. Al principio a Kate le había causado aprensión su aire vago y cohibido —tenía a menudo esas aprensiones inmediatas—, pero luego fue igualmente consciente de que, al cabo de cinco minutos, algo había surgido —no pudo expresarlo de otro modo— entre ellos. No era nada que pudiera verse o tocarse, pero se podía sentir y saber; a los dos les había sucedido algo.

Se habían mirado más tiempo y con mayor insistencia de lo normal incluso en una fiesta celebrada en una galería; pero eso, al fin y al cabo, no habría tenido demasiada importancia, si no hubiese habido más cosas. No fue, en suma, sólo que sus ojos se hubiesen encontrado, sino que también entraron en contacto otros órganos, facultades y antenas conscientes, y, cuando Kate recordó después aquel hecho súbito y

profundo, curiosamente lo imaginó de un modo muy peculiar: había visto una escalera apoyada en la tapia de un jardín y se había atrevido a subir para asomarse al jardín que había supuesto que debía haber al otro lado. Al llegar arriba se había encontrado cara a cara con un caballero que al parecer había tenido idénticas intenciones justo en el mismo momento, y los dos curiosos se habían quedado mirándose desde lo alto de sus escaleras. Lo importante era que se habían quedado allí el resto de la velada, no habían bajado; y, de hecho, al menos Kate había tenido todo el tiempo la sensación de estar arriba, sin retirada posible. O, dicho de manera más sencilla, se habían interesado mutuamente; y, de no haber sido por un feliz azar ocurrido seis meses después, el incidente no habría pasado de ahí. Este azar fue tan natural como todo lo que sucede en Londres: una tarde, Kate se había encontrado en el metro con el señor Densher. Había subido al tren en Sloane Square para ir a
Queen's
Road y el vagón en el que entró estaba casi lleno. Densher se había sentado en el banco de enfrente y en el rincón más alejado, pero ella lo reconoció antes de que el tren volviera a ponerse en marcha. El día y la hora eran oscuros, con ella subieron otras seis personas y le costó encontrar asiento, pero su conciencia fue directa hacia él como si se hubiesen encontrado en un desierto luminoso. Ninguno de los dos había dudado ni un segundo; se miraron en el vagón abarrotado como si ella hubiese sabido que él estaría allí y él hubiese esperado verla entrar; así que, aunque dadas las circunstancias no pudieron intercambiar más que sonrisas y signos a modo de saludo, habría sido lo más natural que se hubiesen apeado en la siguiente estación para gozar de un poco más de tranquilidad. De hecho, Kate estaba segura de que allí era donde se dirigía el joven, por lo que quedó claro que si no se había bajado era sólo porque quería hablar con ella. Tuvo que seguir, con dicho propósito, hasta High Street, en Kensington, donde la marcha de uno de los pasajeros le dio su oportunidad.

Dicha oportunidad dejó a su disposición el asiento que había delante de ella, y la precipitación con que lo ocupó pareció revelar su impaciencia. La presencia de desconocidos a ambos lados no favoreció la conversación, pero es posible que semejante restricción les marcara como no podría haberlo hecho ninguna otra cosa. Si el hecho de que hubiera vuelto a presentárseles la ocasión podía expresarse de manera tan intensa sin decir una palabra, los dos debieron tener la sensación de que no era por casualidad. Lo extraordinario fue que no retomaron su relación donde la habían dejado sino mucho más adelante, y que a dichos vínculos se añadió uno más entre High Street y Notting Hill Gate, y todos adquirieron entre esta última estación y
Queen's
Road una intensidad desmesurada. En Notting Hill Gate se bajó del tren el hombre que viajaba a la derecha de Kate y Densher se apresuró a ocupar su asiento, aunque no sirvió de mucho pues una señora se sentó instantes después en el que Densher acababa de dejar libre. Casi no pudo decirle nada, o al menos Kate apenas entendió lo que le decía, pues le angustiaba la certeza de que el hombre que tenía enfrente, un joven que no hacía más que ajustarse el monóculo, había reparado desde el primer momento en que estaba visible y extrañamente afectada. Si aquel individuo la había descubierto, ¿qué no habría notado Densher?: la pregunta encontró sobrada respuesta cuando, al llegar a la siguiente estación, se apeó justo detrás de ella. Éste fue el verdadero principio, el principio de todo; la ocasión anterior, en la fiesta, no había sido más que un simple preludio. Jamás en su vida se había dejado llevar así, pues antes —en las insignificantes aventuras que habían desempeñado un papel en su vida— siempre había habido, según el criterio vulgar, otras cosas que tener en cuenta. La acompañó hasta Lancaster Gate, y luego los dos se alejaron andando, igual que una criada coqueteando con el panadero, se dijo Kate para sus adentros.

Después llegaría a pensar que esa apariencia había sido la más conveniente para una relación que como mejor podía describirse era precisamente como la del panadero y la criada. Se decía que, a partir de ese momento se habían frecuentado y que ese tecnicismo había llegado a representar al mismo tiempo el alcance y el límite de su vínculo. Como es natural, él le pidió permiso allí mismo para ir a visitarla y, como cualquier joven que no era verdaderamente joven, y no pretendía ser una flor de invernadero, Kate se lo dio. Enseguida le dejó claro que, por el momento, ésa era la única base posible para su relación: no era más que una mujer londinense contemporánea, muy moderna, ajetreada, libre y honrada. Por supuesto, se lo contó a su tía y pasó por el formalismo de pedir su autorización; y luego recordó que, aunque contó la historia de su nueva relación de forma tan sucinta como los hechos mismos, la señora Lowder había mostrado una amabilidad sorprendente. La ocasión había servido para recordarle a ella en todos los sentidos que su anfitriona era insondable, y al mismo tiempo comprendió que había sido entonces cuando había empezado a preguntarse, por decirlo vulgarmente, qué estaría tramando. «Puedes recibir a quien quieras, cariño», había respondido la señora Lowder, que, por lo general, se oponía a que la gente hiciera lo

que quisiera, y su inesperada respuesta le dio a su sobrina mucho en lo que pensar. Se le ocurrieron muchas explicaciones, todas divertidas, aunque en el sentido sombrío y meditativo que cultivaba en esos tiempos Kate en su retiro del piso de arriba. Merton Densher fue a visitarla el domingo siguiente, y la señora Lowder tuvo la magnanimidad de dejar que su sobrina lo recibiera a solas. Lo vio, no obstante, el domingo siguiente, para invitarlo a cenar; y cuando, después de cenar, volvió en otras tres ocasiones, encontró la manera de que pareciese que el joven había ido a visitarla a ella. La convicción de Kate de que a su tía no le gustaba aquel visitante hizo que aquello resultara aún más insólito y se sumase a la evidencia, a estas alturas muy voluminosa, de que era una mujer extraordinaria. Si la energía de su carácter hubiese sido normal, habría exhibido su antipatía sin tapujos, pero lo que estaba haciendo era esforzarse en conocerle para ver mejor dónde «pillarlo». Ésta fue una de las reflexiones hechas por nuestra joven en su retiro; sonrió desde su atalaya, en aquel silencio hecho de sonidos irrelevantes, y comprendió que es fácil aceptar a los demás si así podemos someterlos. Cuando la tía Maud quería librarse de alguien no recurría a nadie: claramente prefería hacerlo con sus propias manos.

Pero lo que más intrigaba a la joven eran las implicaciones de semejante despliegue de diplomacia por su causa. ¿Cómo interpretar su situación en vista de que, a todas luces, su tía temía disgustarla? Era como si aceptase en parte a Densher por miedo a que, de lo contrario, ella pudiera dejarse llevar por el despecho. ¿No habría considerado su tía el peligro de que en tal caso rompiera con ella y se fuese? Este peligro era exagerado, pues nunca habría hecho nada tan drástico; pero, al parecer, así era como la veía la señora Lowder y cómo juzgaba razonable tratar con ella. Entonces ¿qué importancia le atribuía en realidad y qué extraño interés podía tener en no incomodarla? Su padre y su hermana tenían su propia respuesta, aunque ignorasen por qué razón Kate se había planteado esa pregunta: a su entender, la dueña de Lancaster Gate estaba ansiosa por enriquecerla, y la explicación que daban a semejante anhelo era que, después de que el azar la hubiese llevado a conocerla de cerca, se había quedado deslumbrada y fascinada. Celebraban y admiraban así una de esas fantasías tardías de las ancianas ricas, caprichosas y excesivas, tanto más notable porque no respondía a ninguna confabulación, y acumulaban los posibles beneficios con los que colmaría al objeto de su generosidad. Kate sabía a qué atenerse respecto a sus posibilidades de triunfo; sin duda se consideraba atractiva, pero también dura, fría e inteligente, y tan poco ambiciosa que era una lástima para su tranquilidad que no pudiera decidir si adoptar una indiferencia sutil o una indiferencia estúpida. A veces su inteligencia la volvía imperturbable, tal vez demasiado, pero en otras ocasiones la inquietaba su estulticia, de manera que al parecer no sacaba provecho de ninguno de los dos extremos. En ese momento, no obstante, sabía que se encontraba en una situación delicada y hasta su madre, triste, desilusionada y agonizante, le había recordado, mientras la tía Maud hablaba con la enfermera en las escaleras, que había que aprovechar tales ocasiones con la ayuda de la Providencia. La buena mujer había muerto convencida de que estaba aprovechando la que se le había presentado.

Kate salió a dar uno de sus paseos con Densher justo después de su visita al señor Croy; aunque, como de costumbre, pasaron la mayor parte del tiempo conversando sentados. Al pie de los árboles, cerca del lago, parecían viejos amigos, entre momentos de aparente seriedad en los que daban la impresión de estar resolviendo todos los problemas de su vasto y joven mundo y aún más frecuentes periodos de silencio, en los que cualquiera que hubiese pasado por allí los habría tomado por una pareja que llevase mucho tiempo prometida. Parecían, pues, viejos amigos y no un par de jóvenes que se habían conocido apenas un año antes y llevaban casi todo aquel tiempo sin verse. De hecho, los dos creían conocerse desde hacía mucho y, aunque se habían visto en contadas ocasiones, tenían la sensación de que habían sido muchas, y muy parecidas, y la confusa intención de que fuesen muchas más, y lo menos diferentes posible. El deseo de que así fuese tal vez tuviera que ver con que, a pesar del diagnóstico del desconocido, no habían llegado a ningún arreglo formal ni definitivo. Muy al principio Densher había planteado la cuestión, pero había recibido la obvia respuesta de que era demasiado pronto, y de este modo había ocurrido algo singular: habían aceptado que su relación era demasiado corta para comprometerse, pero habían actuado como si fuese lo bastante larga para cualquier otra cosa y el matrimonio se alzase ante ellos como un templo al que no conducía ningún camino. Pertenecían al templo y se veían en sus terrenos, y se hallaban en una etapa en la que eso ofrece consuelos diversos. De hecho Kate tenía tan pocos confidentes que no entendía de dónde procedían las sospechas de su padre. Claro que en Londres los rumores corren deprisa, pero lo de Marian también era misterioso, pues la tía Maud no se relacionaba con ninguno de los dos. Sin duda, alguien debía de haberla visto. Al fin y al cabo, no se había molestado en ocultarse y no se sentía capaz de hacerlo. Pero ¿cómo la habían visto? Y ¿qué había que ver? Estaba enamorada, lo sabía, pero eso era asunto suyo, y tenía la sensación de haberse comportado, aun entonces, con un decoro casi exagerado.

—Tengo la impresión —le dijo nada más verlo—, de hecho estoy segura, de que la tía Maud tiene

intención de escribirte; y creo que más vale que lo sepas —y enseguida añadió—: para que decidas cómo responder. Ya imagino lo que te va a decir.

—Y ¿tendrás la bondad de contármelo?

Ella lo pensó un poco.

—No puedo. Lo estropearía. Ella sabrá explicarte su opinión mejor que nadie.

—¿Que soy un sinvergüenza; o, en todo caso, no lo bastante bueno para ti?

Estaban otra vez en sus sillas de un penique, y Kate hizo otra pausa.

—Dirás que no eres lo bastante bueno para ella.

—¡Ah!, entiendo. Y eso es necesario.

Lo planteó más como una verdad que como una pregunta; pero había habido muchas verdades que uno u otro se habían encargado de desmentir. No obstante, en este momento Kate lo dejó y se limitó a decir poco después:

—Se ha portado de una forma de lo más sorprendente.

—Y nosotros también —declaró Densher—. Creo que hemos sido de lo más decentes.

—Sí, ante nosotros mismos y ante los demás. Pero no ante ella. En su opinión —añadió Kate—, hemos sido monstruosos. Nos ha estado dando cuerda. Conque, si te manda llamar —repitió la chica—, es mejor que sepas a qué atenerte.

—Siempre lo he sabido. Lo que me preocupa es si lo sabes tú.

—Bueno —dijo Kate al cabo de un instante—. Ya te dará ella su opinión.

Él la miró un buen rato y, cualesquiera que fuesen los deseos de quienes la asediaban por su bien, a Kate esas miradas nunca le parecían suficientes. Tenía la sensación de que debía atesorarlas y adueñarse de ellas por completo; y lo raro era que razonaba o, en todo caso, actuaba como si pudiera mezclarlas con otras cosas y cultivarlas en secreto sin tener que pagar ningún precio. Admitía en lo más hondo que se amaban, se alegraba por ella y, para ser francos, también por él de que lo hicieran; pero, distinguida como era, a su manera, tenía de dicho término una idea muy poco convencional. Insistía en que tenían derecho a amar y daba por sentado que ni siquiera se estaban portando con osadía; pero Densher, aunque estaba de acuerdo con ella, no podía menos que sorprenderse de sus valores y simplificaciones. La vida podía ser difícil, estaba claro que iba a serlo, pero se tenían el uno al otro y con eso era suficiente. Así razonaba ella; en cambio, para él, la clave estaba en que no se tenían el uno al otro. Y, no obstante, muchas veces le parecía difícil y grosero plantear la cuestión, a la luz de ciertas cuestiones extrañas y peculiares. No podían dejar a la señora Lowder fuera de sus proyectos. Era una presencia demasiado imponente y demasiado próxima y en determinados momentos, hiciesen lo que hiciesen, tenían que abrir la puerta y dejarla pasar. Y cada vez que entraba la observaban con impotencia, como si fuese en un coche de caballos, mientras daba una vuelta en torno a ellos, igual que la estrella del circo cuando da la vuelta a la pista, y detenía el carruaje en el centro para apearse con majestuosidad. Nuestro joven tenía la sensación de que era majestuosamente vulgar, pero también de que eso no era todo. No había reparado en su escasez de medios gracias a la vulgaridad de la tía Maud, aunque tal vez la hubiese ayudado a subrayarla, ni tampoco era esa tara lo que la hacía a ella tan fuerte, imprevisible y peligrosa.

Su escasez de medios —de medios suficientes para mantener a nadie más que a él— era, en realidad, lo más desagradable, y nunca se lo parecía más que cuando la contemplaba cara a cara en toda su desvergüenza, junto con todos los elementos de la vida de Kate que, de forma coloquial y conveniente, ellos consideraban divertidos. De hecho, a veces se preguntaba si dichos elementos eran tan divertidos como la secreta convicción, con frecuencia tan vívida para él, de su íntima incapacidad para hacerse rico. Tal convicción era una realidad categórica y un hecho en sí mismo; no llegaba a comprenderlo por más que lo analizaba, aunque, como es lógico, tenía sobre el asunto más elementos de juicio que nadie. Sabía que subsistía aunque estaba igualmente seguro de no ser un incapaz físico o mental y de que no era ni un tullido ni un idiota; sabía que era una realidad absoluta, aunque secreta; y también, cosa extraña, que no le prohibía ni impedía hacer cosas normales. Sólo ahora empezaba a plantearse si no le impediría casarse; sólo ahora, y por primera vez, había tenido que poner su caso en la balanza. A menudo, cuando estaba con Kate, le parecía ver la balanza en cuestión, negra e imponente, en distintas posiciones, mientras hablaba o escuchaba. Unas veces estaba abajo el platillo derecho y otras el izquierdo, pero nunca llegaba a un feliz equilibrio y uno u otro acababan desplazando el fiel. Una y otra vez, se preguntaba si era más innoble proponerle a una mujer que te diera una oportunidad o aceptar en conciencia que semejante oportunidad conllevaría, en el caso más favorable, un sinfín de privaciones; si, a fin de cuentas, casarse por dinero no sería menos vergonzoso que casarse sin él. Pero la marca de su frente se distinguía con claridad a pesar de todos esos cambios de humor y de ángulo: tanto si se casaba como si no, seguiría siendo pobre. Su

imaginación era especialmente fértil en ese campo y las innumerables formas de ganar dinero aparecían con total nitidez ante él; podría haber escrito sobre ellas para su periódico con tanta facilidad como sobre cualquier otra cosa. Eso se le daba muy bien: era otra marca en su frente, las dos huellas del dedo de la Fortuna, y la marca a fuego sobre el vellocino pasivo databa del día de su nacimiento y hacía compañía a la otra. Escribía para la prensa con una deplorable facilidad; si nada había podido pararlo a los diez años, menos aún a los veinte: formaba parte en primer lugar de su destino y en segundo del de sus desdichados lectores. Las innumerables formas de ganar dinero eran sin duda, en cualquier caso, lo que más ocupaba su imaginación cuando echaba la silla atrás y apoyaba la cabeza en las manos entrelazadas. Y lo que más solía prolongar esa actitud era la reflexión de que tales métodos únicamente servían para los demás. Sea como fuere, en esa ocasión comprendió mejor que nunca, y en apenas un minuto, las circunstancias que impedían a su compañera tener una relación sencilla. Comprendió sobre todo cómo las veía ella, pues le habló con la mayor franqueza y le contó la visita a su padre y la subsiguiente escena con su hermana, un ejemplo de cómo estaba eternamente condenada a restañar, de una manera u otra, las esperanzas de aquella mujer desdichada.

—¡Es la eterna canción —exclamó Kate— del fracaso de mi familia!

Volvió a contárselo todo y en esta ocasión, o eso le pareció a él, aún con mayor detalle: el deshonor que había caído sobre ellas por culpa de su padre, de su locura, su crueldad y su maldad; el estado en que se había hallado su madre, herida, abandonada, expoliada e impotente, y su comportamiento espantosamente irracional a la hora de dirigir lo que había quedado de su hogar; la muerte de sus hermanos pequeños, uno, el mayor, a los diecinueve, de fiebre tifoidea contraída en un sitio infecto —como supieron después— que habían alquilado para ir de veraneo; el otro, el orgullo de la familia, guardiamarina en el Britannia, muerto ahogado de una manera espantosa, y ni siquiera por accidente en alta mar, sino por un calambre, cuando se bañaba, demasiado avanzado el otoño y sin nadie que pudiera rescatarlo, en un malhadado riachuelo mientras estaba de visita en casa de uno de sus camaradas. Luego el matrimonio antinatural de Marian, en sí mismo una forma desganada de ofrecer la otra mejilla a la fortuna: su estado actual de calamidad y queja, sus niños grasientos, sus aspiraciones imposibles, sus odiosas visitas, todo confirmaba el peso con que se había abatido sobre ellos la mano del destino. Kate lo describía, como ella misma confesaba, con un exceso de impaciencia, y para Densher gran parte de su encanto residía en que generalmente imprimía ese tono a sus descripciones, en parte para divertirle con un humor libre y vivaz, y en parte —y ahí radicaba su mayor encanto— para liberarse de su constante visión de la incongruencia de las cosas. Lo había presenciado todo demasiado pronto y con demasiada claridad y era lo bastante inteligente para comprenderlo y hacerse cargo de tantas desgracias; por eso, cuando hablaba con él, era vehemente e incluso poco femenina: era como si hubiesen elegido para comunicarse la vía más corta de lo fantástico y el feliz lenguaje de la exageración. Desde muy pronto les había quedado muy claro que, aunque tuviesen vedada cualquier otra vía directa, al menos se abría ante ellos el dominio del pensamiento. Podían pensar lo que quisieran sobre lo que les viniera en gana, o, dicho de otro modo, podían decirlo. Y decírselo sólo el uno al otro hacía que fuese aún más sustancioso. El efecto era que lo que decían cuando no estaban juntos les parecía insípido y nada contribuía más a aislarlos, en determinados momentos, en su pequeña isla flotante, que la seguridad de que en todos esos demás casos estaban fingiendo. Debemos añadir que nuestro joven era consciente de que Kate era quien más se beneficiaba de aquella peculiar recreación de la intimidad. Siempre había tenido la sensación de que ella había vivido más y, cuando le contaba los sombríos desastres que habían afligido a su familia y contemplaba el arduo y extraño resultado de su presente exaltación —pues al parecer de eso se trataba—, pensaba que sus grises asuntos domésticos apenas resistían la comparación. Como es natural, lo que más le interesaba era la personalidad de su padre, pero el retrato que ella hacía de sus aventuras en Chirk Street ponía en evidencia lo desdibujada que estaba todavía para él dicha personalidad. ¿Qué era, por decirlo con franqueza, lo que había hecho el señor Croy?

—No lo sé… ni quiero saberlo. Lo único que recuerdo es que hace muchos años, cuando yo tenía unos quince, sucedió algo que lo volvió inaceptable. Al principio para el mundo en general y luego, poco a poco, para mi madre. Por supuesto, nosotras no nos enteramos —le explicó Kate—, aunque lo supimos después; y, curiosamente, fue mi hermana la primera que dedujo que había hecho algo. Me parece estar oyéndola, cuando me lo contó al lado de la chimenea, una mañana de domingo fría y oscura, en la que no habíamos ido a la iglesia por culpa de una niebla muy espesa. Yo estaba leyendo un libro de historia debajo de una lámpara (cuando no íbamos a la escuela, teníamos que leer libros de historia) y de pronto la oí decir sin venir a cuento, entre la niebla que se había colado en la habitación: «Papá ha hecho algo malo». Y lo raro es que la creí en el acto y la he creído desde entonces, aunque no quiso decirme más… ni en qué consistía aquella maldad, ni cómo se había enterado, ni qué le iba a pasar, ni nada. Siempre habíamos tenido la

sensación de que le habían ocurrido, y seguían ocurriéndole, muchas cosas, por lo que, cuando Marian me dijo que estaba segura, totalmente convencida, que lo había deducido ella sola y que con eso bastaba, la creí, me pareció lo más natural. No obstante, me pidió que no le preguntara a mamá y eso aún hizo que fuese más natural, así que nunca le dije una palabra. Lo curioso fue que, pasado un tiempo, mi madre me habló del asunto por iniciativa propia, aunque fue mucho después. Hacía mucho que mi padre no vivía con nosotras y ya nos habíamos acostumbrado. Mamá debía de albergar algún temor, alguna convicción de que yo sabía algo, o tal vez pensó que era lo mejor que podía hacer. Fue tan brusca como Marian: «Si oyes decir algo malo de tu padre, y no simplemente que es odioso y ruin, ten presente siempre que es falso». Así supe que era cierto, aunque recuerdo que le dije entonces que por supuesto sabía que no lo era. Podría haberme contado la verdad con la seguridad de que yo desmentiría, con más vehemencia y eficacia, creo, que ella, cualquier acusación que hubiese podido oír. El caso, no obstante —continuó la joven—, es que nunca se me presentó la oportunidad, como he tenido ocasión de comprobar con cierta sorpresa. Gracias a eso el mundo ha sido a veces un lugar más decente. Nadie me ha dicho jamás una palabra. Se ha convertido en una parte del silencio que le envuelve, del silencio que lo ha borrado para el mundo. Ya no existe para la gente. Y sin embargo sigo estando segura. De hecho, aunque no sé ahora más de lo que sabía entonces, estoy aún más segura que antes. Y eso —prosiguió— es lo que tengo que contarte de mi padre. Si no te parece suficiente prueba de confianza no sé qué te lo parecerá.

—Claro que me lo parece —respondió Densher—, pero no es que me aclare gran cosa. En realidad no me has dicho nada. Es todo tan vago que ¿cómo no pensar que tal vez estés equivocada? ¿Qué es lo que ha hecho, que nadie puede nombrarlo?

—De todo.

—¡Ah… de todo! Eso es lo mismo que decir nada.

—Pues algo en concreto —dijo Kate—. Que la gente sabe, aunque, gracias a Dios, nosotras ignoramos. Y que ha supuesto su fin. No creo que te costase mucho averiguarlo. Podrías preguntar por ahí.

Densher no dijo nada de momento, pero rectificó su silencio al instante.

—No lo haría por nada del mundo, antes preferiría cortarme la lengua.

—Sin embargo es parte de mí —dijo Kate.

—¿Parte de ti?

—La deshonra de mi padre —su voz revelaba más que nunca un pesimismo orgulloso e imperturbable—. ¿Cómo quieres que algo así no afecte enormemente a nuestra vida?

Kate tuvo que soportar una de sus largas miradas y la apuró hasta las heces más profundas y embriagadoras.

—Quisiera —replicó él— que, si has de sobrellevar algo así, te apoyaras un poco más en mí. ¿Es miembro de algún club? —preguntó dubitativo.

Ella movió solemne la cabeza.

—Antes sí… de muchos.

—¿Se ha dado de baja?

—Lo han echado. Estoy segura. Eso debería servirte de indicio. Le ofrecí —continuó enseguida la joven — irme a vivir con él, para eso fui a visitarle, para proporcionarle un hogar en la medida de lo posible. Pero no quiso saber nada.

Densher encajó la confidencia con una sorpresa evidente pero generosa.

—¿Le ofreciste irte a vivir con él y compartir sus miserias, a pesar de que dices que es «inaceptable»? —Por un momento, el joven sólo vio la sublime belleza de aquel sacrificio—. ¡Eres muy valiente!

—¿Crees que iba a sacrificarme por él? —No estaba dispuesta a reconocerlo—. No fue valor… sino lo contrario. Lo hice para salvarme, para escapar.

La expresión de él, tan constante en los últimos tiempos, dejaba claro que nadie le inspiraba sentimientos tan nobles como Kate.

—Escapar ¿de qué?

—De todo.

—¿Tal vez de mí, por casualidad?

—No; le hablé de ti, le dije, o le di a entender, que, si me lo permitía, te llevaría conmigo.

—Pero no lo permitirá —replicó Densher.

—No quiso saber nada, fuesen cuales fuesen las condiciones. No está dispuesto a ayudarme, ni a salvarme, ni a mover un dedo por mí —prosiguió Kate—. Se escabulló, con su estilo inimitable, y me echó.

—Te echó en mis brazos, por suerte —dijo Densher.

Pero ella siguió hablando como si no tuviese delante más que la escena que acababa de evocar.

—Es una pena, porque te habría gustado. Es un hombre maravilloso y encantador. —Su acompañante soltó otra vez una de esas risas que manifestaban hasta qué punto el tono de voz de Kate condenaba la conversación de las demás mujeres, si es que conocía a otras, al gris desierto de lo convencional, y ella prosiguió—: Seguro que habría acabado conquistándote.

—¿Aunque no fuese de su agrado?

—Bueno, a él le gusta complacer a la gente —explicó la joven—. Te habría apreciado y tratado con inteligencia. Soy yo quien no soy de su agrado, por haberme fijado en ti.

—Pues ¡menos mal —exclamó Densher— que te fijaste en mí y le diste motivos para oponerse!

Ella respondió al instante, con cierta incoherencia.

—No. Le dije que, si era necesario, te dejaría para irme con él. Pero no sirvió de nada, por eso he dicho —continuó— que no quiso saber nada, ni con unas condiciones ni con otras. Lo primordial es no dejarme escapar.

Densher dudó.

—Pero si acabas de decir que no querías escapar de mí…

—Quería escapar de la tía Maud. Pero él insiste en que sólo puedo ayudarle a través de ella; igual que Marian insiste en que sólo puedo ayudarla a través de ella. A eso me refería —volvió a explicar— con lo de que me han echado.

El joven se quedó pensativo.

—¿Tu hermana también te ha echado?

—¡Oh, a empujones!

—Pero ¿te has ofrecido a ir a vivir con ella?

—Lo haría sin dudarlo si ella quisiera. En eso consiste toda mi virtud, en un mínimo y limitado sentimiento familiar. En una especie de piedad mezquina y estúpida. No sé cómo llamarlo. —Kate se enrocó con valentía en su argumentación—. A veces, cuando estoy sola, tengo que contener las lágrimas al pensar en mi pobre madre. Pasó pruebas terribles que acabaron con ella, ahora lo sé, entonces no, porque era egoísta; y mi situación, comparada con la suya, es un triunfo que les resulta ofensivo. Marian no para de repetírmelo; y, como te he dicho, mi padre también, aunque sea con su estilo inimitable. Mi situación representa un gran valor para los dos —Kate siguió hablando y hablando, lúcida e irónica, sin dar lugar a confusiones piadosas—. De hecho, soy el único valor que tienen.

Para nuestra joven pareja ese día todo se movía, a pesar de las pausas y los márgenes, a mayor velocidad: la rapidez y la preocupación parecían relámpagos en un día bochornoso. Densher la observaba más decidido que nunca.

—Y ¡eso es lo que te retiene!

—Pues claro. Es como tener un zumbido constante en los oídos. No hago más que preguntarme si tengo algún derecho a la felicidad personal y a alguna otra cosa que no sea ser rica, nadar en la abundancia y ser lo más deslumbrante y elegante posible.

Densher hizo una pausa.

—¡Oh!, con un poco de suerte también podrías aspirar a la felicidad personal.

La respuesta inmediata a estas palabras fue un silencio igual al suyo; después Kate le miró a la cara y dijo sin levantar la voz y con mucha sencillez:

—¡Cariño!

Él hizo otra pausa y respondió en el mismo tono:

—¿Por qué no lo solucionas casándote mañana conmigo por lo civil? Nada sería más fácil.

—Antes de decidirnos —respondió enseguida Kate— esperemos a que la hayas visto.

—¿A eso lo llamas adorarme? —preguntó Densher.

Hablaban con una extraña mezcla de franqueza y prudencia, y nada habría armonizado mejor con eso que el modo en que ella dijo por fin:

—Tú también la temes.

Él respondió con una gélida sonrisa.

—¡Para ser dos jóvenes distinguidos y de espíritu elevado somos un poco raros!

—Sí —continuó ella—, somos horriblemente inteligentes. Pero es divertido. Cada cual se divierte como puede. Creo —añadió, no sin valentía— que nuestra relación es muy bonita. No tiene nada de vulgar. Me gusta que las cosas conserven algo de poesía.

Él soltó una risa un poco más relajada que su sonrisa.

—¡Debe asustarte mucho romper conmigo!

—No, no, eso sería vulgar. Aunque, claro —admitió—, soy consciente de que me arriesgo a cometer

alguna bajeza.

—Y ¿qué puede haber más bajo que sacrificarme?

—No voy a sacrificarte. No te quejes antes de tiempo. No quiero sacrificar nada ni a nadie. Ahí radica la dificultad de mi situación, en que quiero y voy a intentar conseguirlo todo. Así —añadió— es como me imagino (y como te imagino a ti también) actuando por ellos.

—¿Por ellos? —el joven exageró su frialdad—. ¡Muchas gracias!

—¿Acaso te son indiferentes?

—Y ¿por qué no me lo iban a ser? ¿Qué son para mí más que un engorro muy considerable?

Justo después de permitirse calificar así a los desdichados que ella apreciaba de manera tan retorcida, se arrepintió de su brusquedad, en parte porque temió que ella explotara. Pero uno de los rasgos más admirables de Kate Croy era que a veces estallaba sólo con un leve resplandor.

—No comprendo cómo te cuesta tanto entender que, siempre que no cometamos ninguna estupidez, podemos hacer lo que queramos. Podemos quedarnos con ella.

Él la miró detenidamente.

—Y ¿que nos pase una renta?

—Bueno, espera a ver.

Volvió a quedarse pensativo.

—¿A ver lo que podemos sacarle?

Por un rato Kate no dijo nada.

—Al fin y al cabo, nunca le he pedido nada; jamás, ni siquiera fui a verla cuando las cosas nos iban peor. Fue ella la que me eligió y la que se posó sobre mí con sus maravillosas garras doradas.

—Hablas —observó Densher— como si fuese un buitre.

—Di mejor un águila… con el pico dorado y grandes alas volanderas. Si lo suyo son las alturas di, en suma, que es un gran globo de seda, pero yo nunca subí a su barquilla. Me eligió ella a mí.

La verdad era que había bosquejado el asunto con mucho estilo y colorido y Densher se quedó contemplando el cuadro como si fuese la obra de un maestro.

—¡Qué habrá visto en ti!

—¡Maravillas! —Alzó la voz y se puso en pie—. Todo. Eso es.

Sí, eso era. Densher siguió pensativo cuando se le plantó delante.

—Entonces ¿quieres que haga lo que pueda por aplacarla?

—Ve a verla, ve a verla —respondió con impaciencia Kate.

—Y ¿que me arrastre a sus pies?

—¡Ah, haz lo que quieras! —y echó a andar con impaciencia.

II

La siguió un buen rato con la mirada, antes de correr a su alcance, y entender mejor que nunca por el porte de su cabeza y el orgullo de sus andares —no sabía cómo expresarlo mejor—, al menos parte de las razones de la señora Lowder. Se estremeció al imaginarse a sí mismo como una razón opuesta a ellas; aunque en ese momento, con la fuente de la inspiración de la tía Maud ante sus ojos, se sintió dispuesto a someterse, mediante casi cualquier abyección o compromiso provechoso, al sencillo mandato de su compañera. Haría lo que ella quisiera, sin atender a su propia voluntad. La ayudaría hasta el límite de sus fuerzas, pues aquel día y el siguiente aquel sencillo mandato, pronunciado mientras le daba la espalda, fue como el chasquido de un enorme látigo en el aire azul, el elevado elemento en el que flotaba la señora Lowder. Tal vez no se arrastrara a sus pies, aún no estaba preparado para eso, pero sería paciente, ridículo, razonable, irracional y por encima de todo muy diplomático. Sería inteligente con toda su inteligencia, que sacudió como hacía a veces con su viejo, querido, estropeado reloj para volver a ponerlo en marcha. Por suerte, no andaba del todo escaso de ese «factor» (por utilizar uno de sus lugares comunes periodísticos), y, con el ingenio que pudieran reunir entre los dos, no podrían culpar a su mala estrella, por muy poco que brillase, si el resultado era la derrota y una rendición prematura e inminente. No era que el desastre le pareciese, en el peor de los casos, un claro sacrificio de sus posibilidades, sino que imaginaba —y con eso ya era suficiente — que demostraría la vanidad y fatuidad de su proyecto de atraerse a la señora Lowder. Cuando, no mucho después, se vio esperando a dicha señora en su enorme salón —la casa de Lancaster Gate le había parecido siempre de un tamaño prodigioso— en respuesta a la invitación que le había hecho llegar por medio de un telegrama con «respuesta pagada», su intención seguía siendo en teoría ceñirse a su plan, aunque las dificultades de ponerlo en práctica aumentaron hasta la misma escala que el lugar.

Estuvo un buen rato de plantón —a él le pareció más de un cuarto de hora—; y, mientras la tía Maud le hacía esperar y esperar, se le acumularon toda suerte de observaciones y reflexiones y se preguntó qué cabía esperar de una persona capaz de tratar a alguien así. La visita, la hora las había propuesto ella, así que sin duda el retraso formaba parte de un propósito de ofenderle. No obstante, mientras deambulaba de aquí para allá e interpretaba el mensaje de su mobiliario barroco y florido, y la inmensa expresividad de sus signos y símbolos, supo que estaba dispuesto a sufrir cualquier ofensa. Incluso afrontó la idea de que no tenía nada a lo que agarrarse y eso era la peor humillación que un hombre orgulloso podía sufrir por una causa justa. Nunca había reparado con tanta claridad en que no causaba literalmente ninguna impresión, al contrario que los objetos que le rodeaban, que eran tan enormes y macizos que parecían deletrear la historia de su anfitriona de una manera directa y agresiva. «Bien mirado, es de una vulgaridad colosal», había estado a punto de decirle un día a la sobrina, aunque al final se había contenido y se había guardado para sí tan pertinente y peligrosa observación, y eso que estaba convencido de que la propia Kate lo admitiría algún día. En ese instante le pareció que venía todavía más a cuento porque, extrañamente, no tildaba a la pobre mujer de rancia o gris. La suya era una vulgaridad lozana y casi bella, pues un temperamento tan agresivo e imponente tenía cierta belleza. Era, en suma, lo peor a lo que se podía enfrentar; y se hallaba en la jaula de la leona sin su látigo, sin el látigo, en una palabra, de una provisión de réplicas adecuadas. La única réplica que tenía a su disposición era que amaba a la joven, y en aquella mansión resultaba un tanto prosaica. Kate le había dicho más de una vez que su tía era Apasionada, como si eso fuese una especie de compensación, y siempre deletreaba la palabra con la A mayúscula y la subrayaba como si pudiera, y de hecho debiera, utilizarlo en su provecho. En ese momento se preguntó cómo aprovechar dicha ventaja, pero cuanto más esperaba menos sencillo parecía. Sin duda le faltaba algo.

Su lento ir y venir pareció proporcionarle la verdadera medida de las cosas; a fuerza de recorrerla, una y otra vez, esa distancia se fue convirtiendo en el desierto de su pobreza y su extensión era tan inmensa que ya no pudo seguir fingiendo que tenía remedio. Lancaster Gate era opulenta, nada más, pero resultaba

inconcebible que él se hallara jamás en una situación remotamente comparable. Leyó con mayor viveza, y de manera más crítica, como hemos insinuado, las apariencias que le rodeaban y no pudo sino sorprenderse de su reacción estética. No había imaginado —a pesar de que Kate le había contado muchas veces que también ofendía su sentido del gusto— que llegara a conceder tanta importancia al modo en que una señora independiente pudiera decorar su casa. La mansión le hablaba con un lenguaje propio y describía con un aliento y una libertad incomparables las diversas asociaciones, conceptos, ideales y posibilidades de su dueña. Nunca, de eso estaba convencido, había visto tantas cosas unánimemente feas y ominosamente crueles. Se alegraba de haber dado con ese calificativo para el conjunto; «cruel» podía ser el tema de un artículo basado en sus impresiones. Escribiría sobre los imponentes horrores que aún florecían y alzaban intacta la cabeza en una época que tanto se enorgullecía de despreciar a los falsos dioses; tendría gracia que lo único que pudiera sacarle a la señora Lowder fuese un articulito. Sin embargo, lo más grave y siniestro era que, cuando pensó en la columna que iba a redactar, no le pareció tan fácil reírse de los imponentes horrores como encogerse ante ellos. No podía describirlos y despacharlos colectivamente como victorianos de la época temprana o tardía, pues no estaba seguro de poder incluirlos bajo una misma rúbrica. Lo único evidente es que eran espléndidos y decididamente británicos. Constituían un orden en sí mismos y abundaban en materiales raros: maderas preciosas, metales, tejidos, piedras. Jamás habría pensado que pudiese existir nada con tantos flecos y festones, con tantos botones y cordones, tan apretado, tan sólido y tan enroscado por todas partes. No había imaginado que nada pudiese tener tantos dorados y cristales, tanto satén y terciopelo, tanto palisandro, mármol y malaquita. Pero la solidez de las formas, los acabados inútiles y los gastos absurdos eran ante todo una ostentación generalizada de moralidad y de dinero, de una conciencia limpia y de una renta abultada. Representaban, en último extremo, una portentosa negación de su propio mundo intelectual y, por primera vez, fue desesperadamente consciente de ello, pues aquellos objetos se lo revelaron por medio de su despiadada diferencia.

No obstante, la conversación con la tía Maud no fue por los derroteros que él había previsto. Aunque no cabía duda de que era apasionada por naturaleza, en esa ocasión la señora Lowder ni amenazó ni suplicó. Lo más probable era que tuviese sus armas y sus defensas al alcance de la mano, pero no las utilizó y ni siquiera aludió a ellas; de hecho, derrochó tanta amabilidad que sólo más tarde comprendió Densher lo hábil que había sido. En cambio, sí reparó en otra cosa que aún complicaba más su posición y que sólo acertó a definir como una bondad imprudente. Su amabilidad, en otras palabras, no era una simple estrategia —él no era lo bastante peligroso para requerir estrategias—, sino que se debía a que le caía un poco simpático. Desde ese momento, ella misma se volvió más interesante y ¿quién sabe lo que podría haber ocurrido si ella también le hubiese sido simpática? En fin, era un riesgo que debía correr. Pese a todo, forcejeó con el joven un rato pero con una sola mano y apenas quemó unos cuantos granos de pólvora. Al cabo de diez minutos, Densher ya había entendido sus intenciones y comprendió, sin que ella tuviese que explicárselo, que si le había hecho esperar no había sido con el propósito de ofenderle. Había querido que imaginara por su cuenta lo que iba a decirle, y si no se lo había anunciado previamente había sido para que lo dedujera allí mismo. Prácticamente lo primero que le preguntó cuando apareció por fin fue si había entendido su insinuación, y eso daba tantas cosas por sentado que la conversación enseguida se volvió franca y exhaustiva. Al oír la pregunta supo que semejante insinuación era justo lo que él había interpretado, supo que le había obligado a perdonarle su exhibición de poderío, y que, si no se esforzaba, no la entendería a ella ni la fuerza de su determinación, por no hablar de la de su imaginación y su cartera. Sin embargo, logró dominarse y se dijo que no le asustaba, que se limitaría a entenderla sin renunciar siquiera a la más débil de sus pasiones. En el mejor de los casos, la actividad de la inteligencia nos traiciona de manera terrible en la acción, en la necesidad de la acción, justo donde la sencillez resulta más esencial, pero, ya que no había modo de evitarlo, la clave era hacer las cosas a la perfección. No cometería ni un solo error a no ser que fuese por el gusto de cometerlo. Debía aplicar su funesta inteligencia a resistir. Y que la señora Lowder aplicase la suya a lo que quisiera.

Cuando la tía Maud empezó a exponer su opinión sobre Kate, él pensó —por el modo en que le dio a entender que, por poco que se esforzara, no tendría más remedio que aceptarla— que no debía de odiarle demasiado. Al parecer no iba a intentar nada de momento; era evidente que, si de ese modo conseguía su propósito, no se vería obligada a hacer nada peor.

—Comprenda que no habría llegado tan lejos si no estuviese dispuesta a ir mucho más allá. Me da igual lo que le cuente usted, tal vez sea mejor que le repita mis palabras; en cualquier caso, no es nada que ella no sepa; todo esto no lo digo por ella, sino por usted: cuando quiero hablar con mi sobrina, sé muy bien dónde encontrarla.

Así se expresó, con una especie de benévola campechanía, con las palabras más claras y sencillas, como

insinuando que, a pesar del adagio, a un buen entendedor no siempre le basta con pocas palabras, pero que a una buena persona sí le bastarían. La interpretación que dio nuestro joven a sus palabras fue que le era simpático porque le parecía buena persona —incluso para sus cánones—, es decir, lo bastante buena persona para marcharse y dejar en paz a su sobrina. Pero ¿lo era, según sus propios cánones? Mientras ella seguía hablando, se preguntó si no estaría condenado a demostrarlo.

—Es la criatura más perfecta posible, por supuesto usted cree saberlo, pero yo lo sé tan bien como usted, y con eso quiero decir que lo sé mejor; y creo que lo que estoy dispuesta a hacer para demostrarlo supera con creces cualquier cosa que pueda intentar usted. No lo digo porque sea mi sobrina, eso me da igual: podría haber tenido cincuenta sobrinas y no habría traído a ninguna a mi casa si no hubiese sido de mi agrado. No digo que no hubiese hecho otra cosa, pero no habría tolerado su presencia. Por suerte, enseguida comprendí lo que suponía la presencia de Kate. Por desgracia para usted, es lo que más aprecio. En suma, como bien sabe, es maravillosa y la quiero como consuelo de mi vejez. Hace mucho que la observo, la he atesorado y, como se dice de las inversiones, he esperado a que suba de valor; usted mismo puede juzgar que ya ha empezado a rendir réditos y sólo estoy dispuesta a cedérsela al mayor postor. Puedo conseguir lo mejor para ella, y tengo mi propia opinión al respecto.

—¡Oh!, ya me hago cargo —respondió Densher— de que su idea de lo mejor no coincide conmigo.

Una peculiaridad de la señora Lowder era que, cuando hablaba, su rostro parecía una ventana iluminada de noche, pero, en cuanto callaba, corría de inmediato la cortina. La oportunidad de responder que brindaban esos silencios no era fácil de aprovechar, pero mucho más difícil era interrumpirla. En todo caso, en esa ocasión el cristal de la ventana no dio facilidades de ningún tipo a su visitante.

—No le he invitado para decirle lo que no es, sino lo que es.

—Claro —se rio Densher—, me parece muy bien.

Su anfitriona prosiguió como si su respuesta careciese de importancia.

—Quiero verla muy, muy alto… en la cumbre y a plena luz.

—¡Ah!, entiendo, quiere usted casarla con un duque y necesita allanar el camino.

Ella respondió sólo con el efecto de la cortina echada y al principio Densher tuvo la impresión de haber sido frívolo o incluso grosero. En varios momentos desastrosos de su presuntuosa juventud ciertos hombres públicos fríos e importantes lo habían tomado por ambas cosas, pero nunca, que recordara, una señora. Eso, más que ninguna otra cosa, le dio la medida de la sutileza de su anfitriona, y por tanto del posible porvenir de Kate. Por un instante, temió que replicara: «¡No sea impertinente!», o algo parecido; y, cuando respondió de otro modo, tuvo la sensación de que había sido muy clemente con él.

—Quiero que se case con un hombre importante. —Con eso fue más que suficiente, pero por si no lo era añadió—: Pienso de ella lo que pienso. Y se acabó.

Se miraron abstraídos, y él notó que había algo más, algo que ella quería que entendiese, aun a costa de hacer un pequeño esfuerzo. Fue su única petición: apeló a la inteligencia de la que sin duda le creía dotado. Y él, por su parte, no era ningún obtuso.

—Como es lógico soy consciente de que no puedo responder a ningún sueño tan emotivo y orgulloso. Tiene usted unos planes muy ambiciosos que entiendo a la perfección. Sé muy bien lo que no soy y le estoy muy agradecido por no habérmelo recordado de peor manera.

Ella no respondió, se mantuvo firme; tal vez para dejarle continuar, si podía, por la vía de la humillación. Era uno de esos casos en los que no se puede mostrar más que pusilanimidad o estupidez. Era la pura verdad: él simbolizaba —en la escala de la señora Lowder, que era la única que importaba— una cantidad ínfima que, por desgracia, no sabía cómo aumentar. Quería ser lo más sencillo posible, pero, por debajo de ese esfuerzo, latía una aprensión más profunda. La tía Maud la expresó, aunque él no habría sabido decir cómo.

—En realidad, creo que no es usted tan importante como piensa, y no voy a convertirle en un mártir prohibiéndole que la vea. Sus paseos por el parque con Kate son ridículos en la medida en que se supone que son por consideración hacia mí; y preferiría mil veces verme con usted, pues a su manera, mi querido joven, es encantador, y arreglar las cosas directamente. ¿Me cree tan tonta como para pelearme si no es necesario? Sería absurdo que llegase a serlo. Puedo borrarle del mapa cuando quiera con sólo mover un dedo; y, como ve, ahora me estoy librando de usted sin necesidad de moverlo. Siempre hago las cosas con elegancia: le he expuesto un plan con el que, si hemos de ser serios, es usted incompatible. Acérquese a él cuanto quiera, pasee a su alrededor, ¡no tema usted frustrarlo!, y continúe con su vida sin perderlo de vista.

Más tarde Densher comprendió que si no había sido aún más explícita era porque enseguida se había dado cuenta de que la entendía. Le conmovió tanto que no le exigiese ninguna promesa, ni le propusiera corresponder a su indulgencia con su palabra de honor de que no tenía intención de entrometerse, que

respondió con una especie de expresión universal de aprecio. Inmediatamente después, habló con Kate y lo primero que recordó —y así se lo contó a la joven— fue el modo en que le había dicho, como si fuesen una pareja de enamorados a punto de separarse de mutuo acuerdo: «Por supuesto, tengo la esperanza de que siempre me considere usted un amigo». Tal vez había ido demasiado lejos, le confesó a Kate, pero había sido tan sincero que había que analizarlo, como suele decirse, bajo su propia luz. Antes de que concluyese la escena con la tía Maud sucedieron otras cosas, pero su insistencia en no tratarle como un peligro de primer orden no tardó en eclipsarlas. Por otro lado, cuando se reencontró con la joven tenía muchas cosas de las que hablar, pues la noche anterior le habían informado sin previo aviso de que podía conseguir un ascenso y ayudar de paso a su periódico —ése fue el halagador modo de expresarlo— marchándose quince o veinte semanas a Norteamérica. Hacía tiempo que en el sanctasanctórum a cuyas puertas se sentaba acariciaban la idea de una serie de cartas desde Estados Unidos con un punto de vista estrictamente social, y ahora creían llegado el momento de llevarla a la práctica. Aquel proyecto cautivo había, en una palabra, escapado nada más abrirse la puerta y volado directo hacia Densher, o al menos se había posado en su hombro, y le había hecho alzar sorprendido la vista de su escritorio manchado de tinta. A Kate le explicó que no podía rechazar la oferta, pues todavía no estaba en situación de rechazar nada, pero que el hecho de que le hubiesen elegido para una misión semejante alteraba su sentido de la proporción. Admitió no saber cómo tomarse aquel honor, que le parecía de lo más equívoco, pues nunca habría pensado ser el hombre indicado para esa clase de trabajo. Reconoció que el director había adivinado su preocupación y le aclaró enseguida el asunto. Todo se reducía a que, inesperadamente, en esa ocasión no querían el tipo de bobadas que él era incapaz de escribir. Por alguna extraña razón, querían sus notas tal como él quisiera redactarlas; lo único que tenía que hacer era entonar su canción y no preocuparse de nada más.

Es decir, no habría tenido que preocuparse de nada más, de no haber sido por la acuciante circunstancia añadida de que debía partir cuanto antes. Su misión, como la llamaron en la oficina, acabaría probablemente a finales de junio, como era deseable; pero no podía perder ni una semana; sus reportajes, según le dieron a entender, debían abarcar todo el país, y había razones de Estado, emanadas de la sede del imperio de Fleet Street[3] por las que convenía actuar lo antes posible. Densher no le ocultó a Kate que había pedido un día para meditar su decisión, porque se sentía obligado a preguntárselo a ella. La joven respondió que sus escrúpulos le habían demostrado más que nunca lo unidos que estaban: la enorgullecía que hubiese dejado a su criterio una decisión tan importante, pero fue aún más clara respecto su deber inmediato. Se alegró de aquel nuevo proyecto y le animó a llevar a cabo su tarea; lo echaría muchísimo de menos, claro, pero le habló muy animada de todo lo que vería y haría. Tanto insistió que él se rio de su inocencia, aunque no se atrevió a aclararle el verdadero tamaño de la gota que él representaba en el cubo del periódico. Al mismo tiempo le sorprendió su rápida comprensión de lo que verdaderamente había sucedido en Fleet Street —y más aún porque coincidía con su propio análisis—. Lo único que querían era que sacara a relucir la cuestión; y harían falta todos los Estados Unidos juntos, aunque tuviera que visitarlos uno por uno, para impedírselo. Lo habían escogido porque no era el típico gacetillero y porque no iba husmeando y balbuceando por ahí. Era una correspondencia para la que, evidentemente, querían un tono nuevo que, a partir de entonces, debería inspirarse en su ejemplo.

—¡Lo entiendes todo tan bien que estás hecha para ser la mujer de un periodista! —exclamó admirado Densher, aunque con la sensación de que la apremiaba más de la cuenta.

A ella pareció impacientarle el halago.

—¿Cómo quieres que no lo entienda con lo mucho que te quiero?

—¡Ah!, entonces lo formularé de otra manera y diré: «¡Cómo te preocupas por mí!».

—Sí —admitió ella—, eso me redime de mi estupidez. Y, si me das la oportunidad —añadió—, tendré imaginación por ti.

Kate habló del futuro con tanta confianza que a él le remordió la conciencia cuando le informó de lo ocurrido con el verdadero árbitro de su destino. Las noticias de Fleet Street habían hecho que pasara a segundo plano, pero ambos elementos se mezclaron muy pronto en el crisol de su conversación, sin que en la mezcla resultante se distinguieran las partes. Además el joven, antes de despedirse, comprendió, de un modo indirecto que incrementó la alegría final, por qué Kate había hablado con tanta indiferencia. La cuestión se aclaró en cuanto él respondió a su pregunta sobre las posibilidades de enfrentarse con éxito a una larga espera. Dichas posibilidades eran la verdadera razón por la que le había apremiado a ir a ver a su tía, y, si después de pasar una hora con dicha señora, Densher aún no tenía la impresión de que la visita había sido provechosa, los hechos parecieron cobrar un significado más halagüeño a medida que Kate los fue repasando uno por uno.

—Si te permite venir a la casa, ¿qué más podemos desear?

—¡Qué más puede desear ella! Es su manera de medir la probabilidad —en el sentido en que la señora Lowder mide la probabilidad— de impedir que le complique la vida mediante algún acuerdo, de cualquier naturaleza, que te permita verme a menudo y con facilidad. Sabe que no tengo dinero y eso le da tiempo. Cuenta con que mi delicadeza me impulse a mejorar mi situación antes de ponerte la pistola en la sien y obligarte a compartirla. El tiempo que tarde en conseguirlo corre a su favor, siempre que no desaproveche la ocasión tratándome de mala manera. Aunque, por otro lado, tampoco quiere maltratarme —prosiguió Densher—, porque, por raro que te parezca, creo que le soy simpático y que, si no estuvieses tú por medio, casi podría llegar a ser su protegido. No desprecia el intelecto y la cultura, al contrario: quiere que adornen su casa y se asocien a su nombre; y estoy convencido de que le duele de verdad que yo sea a la vez tan deseable y tan imposible. —Hizo una pausa y su compañera vio que había esbozado una sonrisa muy extraña, tanto como la que se dibujó en su propio semblante al oír esa extraña descripción—. Si tenemos que ser francos, tengo la sospecha de que, en el fondo, le gusto literalmente más que a ti, y por eso me concede el honor de pensar que asistiré a la destrucción de mi propia causa sin defenderme. En eso, como digo, se basa su tolerancia. No estoy hecho de esa pasta sentimental que se gasta, se lava, sobrevive al uso y resiste la familiaridad. ¡Admítelo, siquiera mínimamente, y tu orgullo y tus prejuicios harán el resto! El orgullo crecerá por las mañas que tiene intención de utilizar contigo y los prejuicios se avivarán por las comparaciones que te dejará hacer y de las que siempre saldré malparado. Le soy simpático, pero nunca le gustaré tanto como cuando haya conseguido hacerme parecer desdichado. Porque entonces tú me querrás menos.

Kate demostró el lógico interés ante su razonamiento, pero no se alarmó lo más mínimo; y al cabo de un instante respondió, como para corresponder a su tierno cinismo.

—Entiendo, entiendo, ya imaginaba que tenía de mí una idea muy elevada, pero has acentuado esa impresión.

—No creo que corras el riesgo de equivocarte —replicó Densher— si dejas que se acentúe cuanto te venga en gana.

Kate no tuvo escrúpulos en darle a entender que le había dado mucho con lo que entretenerse.

—¿Sabes?, que te haya recibido tan bien como dices y haya puesto a mal tiempo buena cara me parece colosal y digno de las otras muchas cosas por las que merece un lugar aparte entre todas las personas que conozco.

—¡Oh!, es que tu tía es colosal —concedió el joven—. Tanto como el carro de Yaganatha[4]: ésa fue la imagen que me vino a la cabeza ayer mientras esperaba a que me recibiera en Lancaster Gate. Los objetos del salón eran como las formas de ídolos extraños, las excrecencias místicas que salpican la parte frontal del carro.

—Sí, ¿verdad? —replicó la joven, e iniciaron, a propósito de dicha peculiaridad de su maravillosa señora, uno de esos diálogos libres y profundos en los que cualquier cosa que no fuese la mutua confianza resonaba como una nota falsa.

Había complicaciones, había preguntas, pero estaban más unidos que nunca. Por un tiempo, Kate no dijo nada para refutar la diplomacia «colosal» de la tía Maud y lo dejaron ahí, como habrían hecho con cualquier otra cosa, a modo de monumento a su poder. Pero Densher continuó contándole que había tenido que enfrentarse en otros sentidos al carro de Yaganatha; no omitió nada del relato de su visita, y menos aún el modo en que la tía Maud había atacado por fin con franqueza —aunque sólo después de que ejerciera una cautelosa presión sobre ella— a él personalmente y le había reprochado su falta de las cualidades adecuadas, los accidentes que le habían sobrevenido en el extranjero, sus extraños antecedentes. Había llegado a decirle que sólo era inglés a medias, lo que, convino Kate, habría sido horrible, de no haber sido porque él se lo había buscado.

—Sentía mucha curiosidad —explicó— por saber de sus propios labios qué clase de extraña criatura, qué tipo de anomalía social, podía ser una persona con una educación como la mía para alguien que se rige por tales convenciones.

Kate guardó silencio un instante y luego dijo:

—Y ¿qué más te da?

—¡Oh! —se rio él—, me gusta mucho tu tía; y, para un hombre de mi profesión, resulta esencial comprender su espíritu y sus opiniones, pues forman parte del alma del gran público con el que nos topamos a cada paso y con el que debemos establecer «códigos». Además —añadió—, quiero complacerla personalmente.

—¡Ah, sí, debemos complacerla personalmente! —repitió su compañera; y sus palabras bien pueden considerarse el reconocimiento por parte de ambos de las ventajas obtenidas por Densher. En realidad,

tenían muchas cuestiones que atender antes de su partida a Nueva York, aunque la que sacó a relucir entonces Densher se refería sobre todo a Kate. Ella lo miró como si de verdad le hubiese contado a su tía más detalles sobre su vida que a ella misma. De ser así, fue por accidente, y los dos pasaron casi media hora, igual que un guía y su víctima en lo alto de una torre, ante el panorama a vista de pájaro de su infancia en el extranjero, sus padres nómadas, los colegios en Suiza y la universidad en Alemania, mientras ella escuchaba con atención. Cualquiera, observó Densher, que perteneciese al mismo mundo que ellas habría reparado enseguida en alguna de esas cosas; cualquiera que formase parte de ese mundo, si es que existía tal cosa, lo habría visto desde la óptica de un inglés. Pero, pese a todo, le gustó confesárselo a una mujer; las mujeres, por suerte, tenían más imaginación y se mostraban más comprensivas con esas diferencias. Kate demostró enseguida ambas cosas y, después de escuchar su historia de principio a fin, declaró entender entonces mejor que nunca por qué le quería tanto. Ella misma, de niña, había pasado temporadas bastante prolongadas al otro lado del canal, aunque había regresado siendo aún una cría; después, en su adolescencia, había acompañado a su madre en sus breves pero repetidos viajes a Dresde, Florencia y Biarritz, débiles y onerosos intentos de hacer economías que le habían dejado —aunque por lo general lo expresara con frialdad debido a su instintiva repugnancia a los arrebatos vulgares— un apego casi místico por lo extranjero. Cuando supo que había en Merton Densher muchas más cosas foráneas de las que se había molestado en identificar, lo miró casi como si fuese un mapa del continente, o una nueva y flamante Murray[5] que le acabaran de regalar. La intención de Densher no había sido presumir, sino más bien suplicar, aunque, en el caso de la señora Lowder, también había pretendido explicarse. Su padre había sido capellán, residente o interino, en tierras extrañas, hasta en veinte asentamientos ingleses, y a lo largo de los años había tenido la rara suerte de que nunca le había faltado un techo. Su carrera en el extranjero nunca se había visto interrumpida y, como su sueldo no era muy grande, había educado a sus hijos de la manera más económica en las escuelas más próximas, para ahorrarse los billetes de tren. Al parecer, la madre de Densher había ejercido por su parte una actividad artística, a cuyo éxito —hasta donde se había visto coronada por el éxito— había contribuido en gran parte aquel período de exilio: la paciente señora copiaba cuadros famosos en los grandes museos, y lo que empezó siendo un don natural acabó convirtiéndose con el tiempo en una oportunidad comercial. Por supuesto, en el extranjero abundaban los copistas, pero la señora Densher tenía una pincelada y una sensibilidad propias y había alcanzado una perfección convincente, e incluso engañosa, que le permitió «colocar» su obra con suma facilidad. Su hijo, que la había perdido, veneraba su recuerdo; y las confidencias que le hizo a Kate sobre ella, y sobre otras cosas hasta entonces oscuras y confusas, hicieron su historia más interesante, sus fuentes más completas y su perfil todo menos común. Insistió mucho en que se había enmendado y había vuelto a ser británico: sus años en Cambridge y sus felices vínculos con el *college* de su padre eran sobrada prueba de ello, por no hablar de su subsiguiente inmersión en Londres que sin duda colmaba la medida. Pero, antes de posarse sobre tierra inglesa, había tenido que atravesar vientos que le habían despeinado las plumas y se había expuesto a iniciaciones imborrables. Lo que le había ocurrido no podía deshacerse.

Cuando Kate Croy se lo hizo notar, él le rogó que no insistiera, y declaró que por eso mismo su caso era tan grave y que lo más probable era que estuviese impedido para un uso nativo o insular. Tras lo cual, como es lógico, ella insistió sin ambages en que, si sus gustos y su ingenio lo hacían variado y complejo, de ninguna manera querría que lo fuese menos; y a Densher no le quedó más remedio que acusarla de mostrarle la espantosa verdad bajo el vano disfraz del halago. Quería que fuese extraordinario, para con el tiempo encontrarlo imposible y, como para eso necesitaba su ayuda, se veía obligada a sobornarlo fingiendo admiración. Lo último que dijo Kate sobre este punto, fue que el modo en que se veía a sí mismo era la prueba evidente de que había probado el fruto prohibido y estaba en disposición de ayudarle a degustarlo, lo cual demuestra el tono feliz de su conversación y la medida en que volaba el tiempo ante la inminencia de su partida. No obstante, la joven insistió en que, cuando le decía que la tía Maud sentiría un gran alivio ante la perspectiva de su ausencia, debía tomárselo al pie de la letra.

—No entiendo por qué —respondió él—, si no le inspiro ningún temor.

Su amiga sopesó su objeción.

—¿Crees que le eres tan simpático que te va a echar de menos?

Densher respondió a su manera fiel y comprensiva.

—Si lo que se propone es ir alejándote de mí poco a poco, probablemente juzgue que el proceso requiere de mi presencia. ¿No debo estar ahí para hacer avanzar las cosas? En mi exilio podrían languidecer.

Continuó con esa fantasía, pero Kate dejó de escucharle. Poco después, Densher reparó en que la joven se había dejado llevar por sus propios pensamientos, y presintió que algo importante había cobrado forma incluso a través de la extravagancia de sus bromas y de la ironía cálida y transparente en la que su animada

intimidad seguía zambulléndose como un nadador confiado. De pronto Kate le dijo con una dulzura inigualable:

—Me comprometo contigo para siempre. —Dicha dulzura pareció impregnarlo todo y Densher no habría sabido separar nada ni, a pesar de la nueva luz que lo iluminaba, imaginar el rostro de Kate al margen de esa alegría—. Dios es testigo de que son tuyas hasta la última chispa de mi vida y de mi fe.

Por el momento, no dijo más, aunque con eso fue suficiente, pese a que habló con tanta calma como si no tuviera importancia. Se hallaban al aire libre, en una de las avenidas de los jardines, y el inmenso espacio, que pareció formar un arco más alto y ancho para ellos, volvió a sumirlos en sus pensamientos. Se dirigieron, movidos por un común instinto, a un sitio cercano que les pareció lo bastante apartado, y allí, antes de que se agotase el tiempo del que disponían, extrajeron de su ensimismamiento todo lo que podía procurarles. Intercambiaron votos y promesas, sellaron su pacto, y acordaron de manera solemne, hasta donde pueden hacerlo las palabras susurradas, los sonidos murmurados, los ojos encendidos y las manos entrelazadas, pertenecerse, solo y sin medida, el uno al otro. Cuando salieran de aquel lugar serían, por tanto, una pareja comprometida, pero antes debían aclarar otras cosas. Densher declaró su negativa a poner fin antes de tiempo a la feliz relación de Kate con su tía, por lo que acordaron actuar con la mayor discreción. Kate por su parte afirmó que no quería privarle a él del favor de la señora Lowder, del que estaba convencida de que seguiría disfrutando; y, como por suerte no le había pedido que le prometiera nada que pudiera atarle las manos, estarían en disposición de ayudar a su buena estrella como quisieran sin necesidad de ser desleales. Sólo quedaba una dificultad que Densher se encargó de formular.

—Por supuesto, debemos tener presente que nuestro plan no funcionará si dejas que se forme esperanzas con respecto a alguien. Mientras sus proyectos sean tan vagos como hasta ahora podremos engañarla. Algún día, no obstante, habrá que sacarla de su error; así que conviene estar preparados. Aunque, en ese caso —observó el joven— no acabo de ver qué habremos conseguido de ella.

—¿Y ella de nosotros? —preguntó Kate con una sonrisa—. Lo que consiga de nosotros —prosiguió la joven— es asunto suyo, es ella quien debe calibrarlo. Nunca le he pedido nada —añadió—, jamás le he impuesto mi presencia. Debe correr sus riesgos y no hay duda de que lo sabe. Lo que habremos conseguido de ella es lo que hemos hablado —terminó de explicar Kate—, habremos ganado tiempo. Igual que, por otro lado, habrá hecho ella.

Densher consideró un instante sus aclaraciones; en esa ocasión no estaba sumido en oscuridades poéticas.

—Sí; no cabe duda de que, en nuestra situación, el tiempo es clave. Por no hablar de la felicidad…

—¿De nuestro secreto?

—Tal vez no tanto del secreto en sí mismo, como de lo que representa y, como bien sabemos, de lo que garantiza y nos une. —Su rostro apuesto se relajó por la felicidad y le transmitió a Kate todo su significado —. Que estemos…

Por un momento, fue como si ella esperase a impregnarse del significado de sus palabras.

—¿Tan trastornados?

—Tan extremadamente trastornados. Aunque —sonrió—, aún lo estaremos más. —Ella respondió sólo con la suavidad de un silencio que acudió a su encuentro desde los confines de su grandísimo futuro y les permitió así tomar posesión de él. Estaban unidos en la práctica y eran muy fuertes, tanto que podían afrontar y permitirse ciertas cosas, por lo que de momento, y hasta que la ocasión fuese más propicia, decidieron guardar el secreto de su acuerdo. No obstante, hasta que Densher hizo otra observación, no les pareció haberlo aclarado del todo.

—Aunque, claro, el día menos pensado puede preguntártelo ella.

Kate consideró la posibilidad.

—¿Que me pregunte, bajo palabra, cuál es nuestra relación? Siempre es posible, pero lo dudo. Mientras estés fuera aprovechará al máximo que se haya relajado la tensión y me dejará en paz.

—Pero recibirás mis cartas.

La joven reflexionó un instante.

—¿Muchas, muchas?

—Muchas, muchísimas… más que nunca, y ¡ya imaginas lo que será eso! Y además —añadió Densher— estarán las tuyas.

—No las dejaré en la mesita del vestíbulo. Las llevaré yo misma a Correos.

Él la miró un instante.

—¿Crees que sería mejor que te las enviase a otro sitio? —Tras lo cual, añadió sin darle tiempo a responder—: Aunque prefiero no hacerlo, me parece más digno.

—Pues claro. Puedes confiar en mi dignidad. Escríbeme —prosiguió— donde quieras. Para mí será un orgullo que se sepa que me escribes.

Él insistió para que no quedase ninguna duda.

—¿Aun a riesgo de tener que pasar por un interrogatorio?

Kate terminó de aclarárselo.

—No temo ningún interrogatorio. Si me pregunta si hay algo firme entre nosotros, sé muy bien lo que decirle.

—¿Que estoy «trastornado»?

—Que te quiero como no querré a nunca a nadie y que puede tomárselo como quiera. —Lo dijo de un modo tan efusivo que pareció otra profesión de fe, como cuando se desborda la marea, e hizo que su compañero la mirara de tal modo que ella tardó en poder responder.

—Además, también te puede preguntar a ti.

—No mientras esté fuera.

—Pues cuando vuelvas.

—Bueno, para entonces —respondió Densher— tendremos nuestra propia dicha. Aunque mi impresión —añadió con ingenuidad— es que, de acuerdo con su estrategia, no me preguntará. Me dejará al margen. No tendré que mentirle.

—¿Así que me dejas eso a mí? —preguntó Kate.

—¡Sí! —se rio él con ternura.

Pero, curiosamente, un instante después fue como si hubiese sido un poco más ingenuo de la cuenta. Le pareció discernir una posibilidad, una realidad natural, una realidad no del todo desmentida por lo que acababa de decir la joven de sus propias intenciones. Se palpaba una diferencia en el aire, aunque sólo fuese la acostumbrada diferencia de sinceridad entre un hombre y una mujer; y casi fue como si esa impresión irritara a la joven, que pareció reflexionar un instante y volvió con cierto resentimiento sobre algo que un minuto antes había pasado por alto. Pareció tomarse en serio la broma sobre su obligación de mentir. Pero también eso lo hizo con mucho encanto.

—Los hombres sois tontos. Incluso tú. No has entendido enseguida que, si llevo yo misma las cartas a Correos, no será por algo tan vulgar como ocultarlas.

—¡Oh!, ya has dicho que sería sólo por el placer de hacerlo.

—Sí, pero no has entendido, ni siquiera ahora, en qué podía consistir ese placer. ¡Hay refinamientos…! —le explicó con paciencia—, de conciencia, de sensación, de apreciación —prosiguió—. No —insistió melancólica—, los hombres no sabéis, de estos asuntos, más que lo que os cuentan las mujeres.

Fue uno de esos discursos, típicos de Kate, que, expresados, como debe ser, con generosidad, alegría y emoción, y aceptados en sí mismos, le acercaban tanto a ella como lo permitían las circunstancias.

—¡Por eso mismo os necesitamos tanto!

Libro III

I

Las dos damas, a quienes, antes de que empezara la temporada en Suiza, habían advertido de lo imprudente de sus planes, de que los puertos de montaña estarían impracticables, el aire frío y los albergues cerrados; las dos damas que, como era típico de ellas, se habían enfrentado a infinitas quejas que habían supuesto interesadas, estaban comprobando, por cómo se desarrollaba su aventura, hasta qué punto habían estado en lo cierto. Veían lo poco ecuánime que había sido el juicio de los *maîtres* y otros funcionarios de los lagos italianos; ellas mismas —al menos la más joven— se daban cuenta de su impaciencia y de lo osado de sus sueños, por lo que, entre la inmensa variedad de conclusiones a las que llegaron, dedujeron que en aquellos operísticos palacios de Villa
d'Este,
de Cadenabbia, de Pallanza y de Stresa[6], las mujeres solas, aunque contasen con la ayuda de una biblioteca ambulante de instructivos volúmenes, corrían el riesgo de que las timasen y engañaran. Por otro lado, los vuelos de su fantasía habían sido modestos; por ejemplo, no habían arriesgado nada vital al albergar la esperanza de atravesar el paso del Brünig. De hecho lo estaban cruzando con relativa facilidad en el momento en que las encontramos, y lo único que les habría gustado, en vista de la impresionante belleza del paso a principios de primavera, habría sido demorarse más tiempo y que los sitios donde detenerse a descansar fueran más numerosos.

Eso fue al menos lo que confesó la señora Stringham, la mayor de las dos, que tenía su propia opinión sobre la impaciencia de la joven, contra la que, no obstante, oponía tan sólo una resistencia muy sibilina. La admirable señora Stringham vivía en una espesa nube de observaciones y sospechas; creía estar en situación de saber mucho más sobre Milly Theale que la propia Milly, y también de tener la obligación de ocultar y utilizar al mismo tiempo lo que sabía. Era consciente de ser la mujer menos dotada del mundo para enredos y duplicidades y se veía abocada a esas sutilezas por una serie de circunstancias y sobre todo por una nueva amistad personal; de hecho no le quedaba más remedio que admitir que había empezado a instruirse en esos disimulos —no sabía de qué otro modo llamarlos— el día en que partió con Mildred de Nueva York. Había llegado de Boston con ese propósito; apenas había visto a la joven —o más bien la había visto sólo brevemente, pues la señora Stringham cuando veía algo lo veía todo— antes de aceptar su propuesta; y de hecho eso la había empujado a subir a un barco que, desde un punto de vista humano, juzgaba como uno de los más grandes, aunque también, sin duda, en muchos sentidos, y debido a su tamaño, uno de los más seguros. En Boston, el invierno anterior, la joven le había suplicado, de manera casi tácita pero conmovedora, y había sembrado en su imaginación la tímida vanidad de dedicarle cierta devoción y ayuda. La modesta vida de la señora Stringham se había visto castigada a menudo por ese tipo de vanidades, sueños secretos que habían revoloteado entre sus estrechas paredes sin reunir el valor suficiente para asomarse a sus lóbregas ventanas. En cambio, esta otra fantasía —la ilusión de tener algún vínculo con la joven de Nueva York— sí se había atrevido: se había posado al instante en la atalaya más alta que había podido encontrar, y podría decirse que se había quedado allí hasta que, sólo unos meses después, había vislumbrado, con sorpresa y alegría, el inconfundible destello de una señal.

Milly Theale tenía amigos en Boston, si es que podían llamarse así, a los que había conocido hacía poco; y se suponía que la visita que iba a hacerles —y que prometía ser larga— se había decidido, tras una serie de desdichas, en busca de una paz que Nueva York no le podía procurar. Nadie dudaba que Nueva York pudiese proporcionar muchas cosas, tal vez incluso demasiadas; pero eso no alteraba la verdad de que lo que había que hacer, cuando la vida o la muerte te golpeaban, era aceptar la gravedad de la situación. Boston podía ayudar a eso mejor que ningún otro sitio, y le había ofrecido a Milly, con toda suerte de presunciones, una especie de ayuda. La señora Stringham nunca olvidaría, pues el momento no se había desdibujado, igual que tampoco había cesado la vibración infinitamente bella que notó la primera vez que

vio a la sorprendente aparición, sin que nadie la anunciara o explicara: la joven delgada, siempre pálida, delicadamente demacrada y agradable y anormalmente angulosa, de no más de veintidós años, a pesar de su aspecto; cuyo cabello en cierto sentido parecía demasiado rojo, incluso para ser natural, como confesaba con ingenuidad, y cuya ropa era demasiado negra incluso para ser ropa de luto, que es lo que era. Un luto neoyorquino, un cabello neoyorquino, una historia neoyorquina, confusa todavía, pero multitudinaria, con la muerte de los padres, los hermanos, las hermanas y casi todos los parientes, a una escala que habría requerido un escenario mayor; era una leyenda neoyorquina de soledad novelesca y conmovedora, y, sobre todo, según se decía, a juzgar por el dinero amontonado sobre la espalda de la joven, una mina de posibilidades neoyorquinas. Estaba sola, estaba afligida, era rica y, en particular, era rara: una combinación capaz en sí misma de atraer la atención de la señora Stringham. Aunque fue su rareza lo que más despertó la compasión de la buena señora, tan segura estaba de que era mayor de lo que nadie —nadie que no fuera la propia Susan Stringham— sospechaba. Susan decidió que Boston no la veía, preocupada como estaba por que viera Boston, y que cualquier afinidad entre ambos caracteres era vana y engañosa. En cambio ella sí la veía, y el momento más bello de su vida fue cuando obedeció el instinto de ocultar dicha visión. No podía explicarlo, porque nadie la habría entendido. Dirían agudezas bostonianas —la señora Stringham era de Burlington, Vermont, que ella consideraba osadamente el verdadero corazón de Nueva Inglaterra, pues Boston estaba «demasiado al sur»— que lo único que harían sería oscurecer su buen juicio.

No podía haber prueba mejor que esa escisión intelectual de la impresión causada en nuestra amiga, que era muy consciente de que sólo brillaba con el reflejo de la luz de tan admirable ciudad. También ella había padecido desdichas, pero no la habían vuelto más interesante; habían sido prosaicas y normales, aunque en dosis suficiente; y para estar en consonancia con ellas se había vuelto aún más normal, al menos para los cánones de Boston. Primero había perdido a su marido y luego a su madre, con quien había ido a vivir tras la muerte del marido; así que ahora, sin hijos, estaba aún más soltera que antes. No obstante, se tomaba las cosas con calma, pues tenía, como ella decía, suficiente para vivir, siempre que viviera sólo de pan: la prueba de lo poco que, de hecho, le gustaba esa dieta era el nombre que se había labrado —Susan Shepherd Stringham— colaborando en las mejores revistas. Escribía relatos cortos, y se congratulaba de pensar que tenía un toque personal: el arte de mostrar Nueva Inglaterra más allá de las cocinas. A ella no la habían educado en una cocina y conocía a otras mujeres a las que tampoco, y hablar en su nombre se había convertido en su misión literaria. Su ambición más preciada siempre había sido ser una verdadera literata y eso la hacía estar con las pinzas relucientes y a punto. Había maestros, modelos a seguir y celebridades, casi siempre extranjeras, a quienes tenía en cuenta y bajo cuya luz trabajaba ingeniosamente; había otros a los que, por mucho que se hablara de ellos, incluía en la categoría de lo inane, pues, a pesar de lo mucho que procuraba discriminar, todas las categorías le fallaban —o al menos dejaban de tener sentido— en cuanto se encontraba en presencia de lo real, de la verdadera vida novelesca. Eso era lo que veía en Mildred y lo que hizo que por un tiempo la mano le temblase demasiado para empuñar la pluma. Había tenido, le pareció, una revelación de esas que ni siquiera la refinada y educada Nueva Inglaterra podía ofrecer; y, hecha como estaba de pequeños y pulcros recuerdos e ingeniosidades, de pequeños trabajos y ambiciones, mezclados con algo moral y personal, que era aún más intensamente impresionable, intuyó que su nueva amiga le estaría haciendo un desaire si su amistad no pasaba de ahí, y también que, en caso contrario, todo lo demás desaparecería. Sin embargo, estaba dispuesta a renunciar a todo y, aunque siguió atendiendo con probidad bostoniana sus asuntos bostonianos, estaba en realidad reservándose. Llevaba su «elegante» sombrero de fieltro, tan tirolés y, al mismo tiempo, a pesar de la pluma de águila, tan hogareño, con la misma seguridad y rectitud de siempre; se colocaba la boa de piel con las mismas honestas precauciones; conservaba el equilibrio sobre las pendientes heladas con la misma habilidad bien entrenada; abría, cada noche, su ejemplar del *Transcript*[7] con la misma mezcla de curiosidad y resignación; asistía a un concierto casi a diario con el mismo derroche de paciencia y la misma economía pasional; entraba y salía a toda prisa de la Biblioteca Pública con el aire de devolver responsablemente o guardar valientemente en su bolsillo la llave del conocimiento; y por último —a eso dedicaba la mayor parte de su tiempo— supervisaba el lento fluir de una literaria «historia de amor» por el sinuoso canal de las revistas que por lo general lograba que nunca se atascara. Pero todo ese tiempo la verdad estaba en otra parte, había regresado a Nueva York y había dejado sin responder dos preguntas muy claras: por qué era tan real y si alguna vez volvería a tenerla tan cerca.

Había dado con una descripción apropiada de la persona que suscitaba dichas preguntas, la imaginaba como una joven con historia. La imponente realidad radicaba en el hecho de que, muy pronto, después de dos o tres encuentros, la joven con historia, la chica con la corona de oro viejo y el luto que no se parecía al luto de Boston, sino que era, al mismo tiempo, más rebelde en su melancolía y más frívolo en sus adornos, le había dicho que no había visto a nadie como ella. Se habían conocido como curiosidades opuestas, y esa

sencilla observación de Milly —si es que era sencilla— se convirtió en lo más importante que le había sucedido; despojó, por un tiempo, de realidad e incluso de pertinencia la historia de amor; y le inspiró en suma una inmensa gratitud y una compasión no precisamente pequeña. Sin embargo, respecto a esta relación, fue lo que probó la llave del conocimiento; iluminó mejor que ninguna otra cosa la historia de la pobre joven. Que la mayor heredera que seguramente habían visto los siglos no hubiera conocido nunca a un simple suscriptor del *Transcript* era una verdad que —anunciada con modestia, humildad y pesar— retrataba la situación. Dejaba a la mayor de las dos la responsabilidad de llenar ese vacío, pero en particular la había empujado a preguntar a quién había frecuentado la pobre Mildred, y qué serie de amistades había hecho falta para producir tan extrañas sorpresas. Dicha pregunta fue la que le permitió aclarar las cosas: la llave del conocimiento encajó en la cerradura en el momento en que la señora Stringham comprendió que su amiga estaba sedienta de cultura. Ella era para Milly la personificación de la cultura, y su tarea consistiría en estar a la altura de ese ideal. La inteligente señora sabía lo que representaba en sí mismo y conocía sus propios límites, por lo que sin duda le habría suscitado cierta aprensión de no haberse adelantado, por suerte para ella, la sensación —y lo decimos con sus propias palabras—, de un angustioso patetismo que fue lo primero que la conmovió y pareció abrirle la puerta de lo novelesco más que cualquier relación, por atrevida que fuese, con las revistas ilustradas. En eso radicaba en esencia la cuestión: era magnífico, novelesco y abismal disponer, como era evidente que disponía, de una renta anual de miles y miles de dólares, tener inteligencia y, si no belleza, al menos en igual medida una extrañeza ambigua y encantadora, que era incluso mejor, y, como remate, disfrutar de una libertad ilimitada, la libertad del viento en el desierto; era indescriptiblemente conmovedor estar equipada así para la vida y que la suerte la hubiese reducido a una serie de pequeños y humildes errores.

Eso trasladó la imaginación de nuestra amiga de vuelta a Nueva York donde tan posibles son las aberraciones en la esfera intelectual, y de hecho concedió un enorme interés a una visita que le hizo después. Milly la había invitado generosamente y le brindó así la ocasión de comprobar si era capaz de resistir la tensión de ver depositada tanta confianza en su inteligencia; y lo más notable fue que resistió más de tres semanas. Aunque, para entonces, su espíritu se había vuelto relativamente osado y libre y manejaba otras cantidades y proporciones que le insuflaron nuevos bríos, por lo que volvió a casa con un dominio absoluto de sí misma. Nueva York era inmensa y sorprendente, con sus extrañas historias y esas generaciones impetuosas y cosmopolitas del pasado que lo habían forjado todo; y aproximarse a esa raza exuberante cuya última flor era aquella rara criatura, con sus antepasados libertinos, sus apuestos primos ya fallecidos, los tíos morbosos y las bellas tías desaparecidas, personas convertidas en bustos y bucles, conservadas, aunque expuestas, en el mármol de famosos escultores franceses, por no decir nada de los brotes más cercanos al tallo, hizo que su pequeño mundo se ampliara y abarrotara de pronto. Las dos amigas habían llevado a cabo un intercambio: la mayor había sido a propósito lo más intelectual posible, y la más joven, con su sinfín de revelaciones personales, había sido igual de distinguida sin darse cuenta. La señora Stringham pensaba que era poesía —y también historia— más sutil aún que Maeterlinck, Pater, Marbot y Gregorovius[8]. Buscó momentos para leer a dichos autores con su anfitriona, aunque en realidad tal vez no les dedicaran mucho tiempo; pero sus éxitos y sus fracasos se hundían rápidamente en las oscuras profundidades de lo puramente relativo, tanta era la rapidez y la fuerza con que se había aferrado a la pista principal. Todas sus dudas y escrúpulos, todos sus ansiosos entusiasmos se habían reducido a una única preocupación: el temor a comportarse de manera torpe o grosera con su amiga. Temía causarle daño y la idea de evitarlo, de evitarlo con fuerza y pasión, de no hacer nada, de no tocarla, porque cualquier roce, por leve, por justo, por serio y ansioso que fuese, podría no ser bueno, podría no ser más que una mancha en su perfección: todo esto empezó a parecerle una idea coherente e inspirada.

Apenas había pasado un mes desde que se produjera el suceso que había determinado la decisión de la señora Stringham cuando —casi pisándole los talones, es decir, a su regreso de Nueva York— recibió una propuesta que suscitó una cuestión con la que tuvo que enfrentarse su delicadeza. ¿Estaría dispuesta a partir a Europa con su joven amiga lo antes posible, y sin poner condiciones? La propuesta llegó por telegrama, con la promesa de explicaciones suficientes, la insinuación de una extremada urgencia y el ruego de que dejase todo lo demás. En honor a su sinceridad, aunque tal vez no tanto a su lógica, hay que decir que aceptó la propuesta en el acto. Desde el principio había querido renunciar a algo por su nueva amiga, pero ahora no le quedaba duda de estar renunciando a todo. Lo que terminó de decidir la cuestión fue la plenitud de una impresión concreta que la había sostenido cada vez más y que sólo habría sabido formular diciendo que el encanto de aquella criatura radicaba precisamente en su grandeza. Le habría bastado con esa explicación, a menos que hubiese dicho, en tono más familiar, que Mildred había sido la mayor impresión de su vida. Era, en cualquier caso, la descripción más notable que podía hacerse de ella, y estaba

claro que sólo con una descripción así podía representársela. Su situación, como suele decirse, sólo podía medirse a gran escala, pero no se trataba sólo de eso. Para decirlo llanamente, su naturaleza le recordaba a la señora Stringham el término con que los periódicos siempre se referían a los nuevos barcos de vapor, el desmesurado número de «metros cúbicos de agua» que desplazaban; de modo que, si decidías acercarte en tu barquito, tenías que dar gracias al sentirte arrastrado por su estela. Milly desplazaba mucha agua y, por raro que pareciese que una joven solitaria y delicada de salud que odiaba el ruido y las candilejas dejara una estela como la de un leviatán, su compañera flotaba a su lado con la sensación de estar balanceándose con violencia. Pese a que estaba más que preparada para tales emociones, la señora Stringham sentía cierto desasosiego al pensar en la coherencia de su propia actitud. Asociarse a la joven por un tiempo indefinido le parecía una manera un tanto extraña de dejarla en paz. Si de verdad quería asegurarse de no tocarla ni mancillarla, lo más sencillo habría sido alejarse de ella. Lo reconocía sin tapujos, igual que lo mucho que deseaba que la joven tomara las riendas de su vida, una vida sin duda destinada a ser mucho más bella que la de las demás personas. Por suerte, la dificultad desapareció en cuanto admitió también, sin gran esfuerzo, que ella, Susan Shepherd —como a Milly le divertía llamarla—, no era una de esas personas. Había renunciado a ese personaje; ahora tenía una vida que vivir, y estaba sinceramente convencida de estar equipada a la perfección para dirigir la de Milly. Estaba segura de que no había nadie más cualificada que ella y en realidad si aceptó embarcarse fue para demostrarlo.

Desde entonces, habían ocurrido muchas cosas, aunque hubieran transcurrido pocas semanas, y sin duda una de las mejores había sido el viaje en sí mismo, por la feliz ruta del sur, la sucesión de puertos mediterráneos y la deslumbrante llegada a Nápoles. Otras dos o tres cosas las habían precedido, como los incidentes —o más bien momentos intensos— de los últimos quince días que pasaron en su país, uno de las cuales había determinado la marcha precipitada de la señora Stringham a Nueva York, donde pasó sin aliento las cuarenta y ocho horas previas a la partida. Pero la vasta y constante luz del mar había sumergido el resto del cuadro, de modo que, a lo largo de muchos días, otras cuestiones y otras posibilidades parecieron tan inútiles como un trío de silbatos en una obertura de Wagner. En la práctica fue la obertura de Wagner lo que prevaleció, tanto en Italia, donde Milly ya había estado, como más al norte, a través de los Alpes, que la señora Stringham también conocía en parte, aunque interpretada con un *tempo* no del todo congruente, sino más bien acelerado por el gran nerviosismo de la joven. La señora Stringham había contado con que fuese nerviosa: era una de las causas de su «grandeza» o, si no una causa, al menos una consecuencia; pero no había imaginado que pudiera tensar tanto la cuerda. Le parecía natural e incluso loable que quisiera recuperar el tiempo perdido, las oportunidades perdidas por el libertinaje de unos antepasados que adoraban París por encima de todo, aunque no precisamente en su faceta más elevada; pero la vaguedad, la vastedad, el ansia sin objeto y el interés sin pausa —que formaban parte del encanto de su extrañeza, tal como la describimos al principio— se fueron volviendo proporcionalmente más sorprendentes, a medida que triunfaban sobre el cambio y el movimiento. Tenía manías e idiosincrasias de las que no podría decirse mucho, salvo que eran una bendición diaria si convivías con ellas; como su capacidad de ser casi trágica e impaciente y al mismo tiempo liviana como el aire; de estar inexplicablemente triste pero luminosa como el mediodía; de ser inconfundiblemente alegre y sin embargo suave como el crepúsculo. La señora Stringham, a estas alturas, lo entendía todo; admirada y perpleja, veía confirmada su opinión de que compartir los sentimientos de su compañera ya era una vida suficiente; pero había claves concretas que todavía no había añadido a las demás, impresiones que de pronto le parecieron novedosas.

Aquel día concreto, en la gran ruta suiza, por alguna razón, había estado repleto de ellas, relacionadas, provisionalmente, con alguna profundidad más profunda de lo que ella había visto, aunque debamos añadir que se había asomado el tiempo suficiente a dos o tres de dichas profundidades para apartarse de pronto de ellas. En suma, ya no era el nerviosismo de Milly lo que le preocupaba, aunque sin duda, dado que Europa era el gran sedante de los norteamericanos, el fracaso del remedio era notable, sino la sospecha de que había algo más, que, no obstante, debía ser anterior al inicio del viaje. Era imposible adivinar de qué nuevo motivo de desasosiego podía haber brotado. Sólo sería explicarlo a medias decir que el entusiasmo que ambas sentían había disminuido de manera natural, y que lo que habían dejado o intentado dejar atrás —lo que la señora Stringham gustaba de denominar los grandes hechos de la vida— estaba volviendo a aparecer como objetos entre el humo cuando empieza a disiparse; porque ésas eran apariencias generales de las que la joven, con su vaguedad cada vez más acentuada, parecía estar desconectada. Lo más parecido a una preocupación personal por parte de la señora Stringham fue aprovechar la ocasión para preguntarse si no habría descubierto, antes que nada, uno de los casos más raros y refinados —como decía para no tener que darle un nombre peor— de tensión norteamericana. Sólo había tenido un momento de alarma, y se había

preguntado si su joven amiga no iría a obsequiarla con un complicado drama nervioso. A final de la semana, no obstante, cuando reanudaron el viaje, la joven había respondido a la pregunta y le había permitido entrever algo, todavía no muy claro, que tenía una realidad, comparada con la cual la explicación nerviosa habría parecido burda. En otras palabras, la señora Stringham se vio, a partir de ese momento, en presencia de otra explicación que seguía siendo ambigua e intangible, pero que, cuando consiguiera delimitarla con precisión, lo explicaría todo y más que todo, y se convertiría al instante en la luz con la que leer a Milly.

Todo esto puede, en cualquier caso, ser revelador del modo en que nuestra joven afectaba a sus amistades y dar testimonio del tipo de fe que inspiraba. Actuaba —al parecer sin proponérselo— sobre la afinidad, la curiosidad y la fantasía de quienes la rodeaban, y no tendremos mejor modo de entenderla que compartiendo esas impresiones y, si es necesario, participando de su confusión. Los reducía, habría dicho la señora Stringham, a un estado de perplejidad consentida, y eso era precisamente, para esa buena señora, lo que, en último extremo, más armonizaba con su grandeza. Si excedía y escapaba a toda medida y resultaba tan sorprendente, era sólo porque los demás se hallaban muy lejos de alcanzar semejante grandeza. El caso es que en aquel maravilloso día en el Brünig el hechizo de contemplarla se había hecho más irresistible que nunca, prueba de a qué —o a una parte de qué— se había visto también reducida la señora Stringham. Casi tuvo la sensación de estar acechando a su amiga para abalanzarse sobre ella en un momento dado. Sabía que no lo haría, no había ido a eso; pero aun así tenía la sensación de estar observándola con disimulo y una especie de interés científico. Le parecía estar merodeando como una espía, haciendo comprobaciones, tendiendo trampas y ocultando pistas. No obstante, sería sólo hasta que descubriese qué era lo que sucedía, y, entretanto, observarla era, después de todo, un modo de aferrarse a ella, amén de una ocupación y una satisfacción en sí misma. El placer de observar además, en caso de que hiciese falta un motivo, emanaba de la intuición de su belleza. Una belleza que al principio no parecía haber formado parte de la situación, y que la señora Stringham, en un primer rapto de amistad, nunca había comentado con nadie; pues había reparado desde el primer momento en que para la gente estúpida —y ¿quién, se preguntaba en secreto a veces, no lo era?— habrían hecho falta demasiadas explicaciones. Había aprendido a no hablar de eso a no ser que alguien lo sacara a relucir, tal como ocurría de vez en cuando, pero no con demasiada frecuencia, y, si se daba el caso, se explayaba. Le emocionaba encontrar a alguien de su misma opinión, aunque discutiera con suspicacia algunos detalles, pero, por lo general, había aprendido a ser lo bastante sutil para emplear las palabras que utilizaba la mayoría de la gente. Lo hacía para fingir que ella también era estúpida y dar por zanjada la cuestión; si insistían demasiado, decía de su amiga que era poco atractiva, incluso fea, aunque también que tenía «una intensa vida interior». Era su particular manera de describir una cara que, gracias, sin duda, a una frente demasiado grande, una nariz demasiado grande y una boca demasiado grande, y muy pocos rasgos y matices convencionales, era expresiva, irregular y exquisita, tanto si hablaba como si callaba. Cuando Milly sonreía, era un acontecimiento público; cuando no, un capítulo histórico. Se habían detenido en el Brünig para almorzar, y la belleza del lugar hizo que se plantearan la cuestión de si quedarse allí más tiempo.

La señora Stringham se movía emocionada en terreno conocido, entre agudos ecos de un pasado guardado en un estuche muy manoseado, que se abría al oprimir un resorte de manera tan fiable como un buen y viejo reloj. La fragante «Europa» de su juventud había consistido en parte en tres años en Suiza, un trimestre de estudios ininterrumpidos en Vevey, recompensados con varias medallas de plata con cintas azules y el ascenso a varios pasos de montaña no demasiado altos acometidos con bastones de montañero. En vacaciones, llevaban a las buenas alumnas de excursión a la montaña y nuestra amiga pudo juzgar ahora por lo que consideraba su familiaridad con los picos menores, que debía de haber sido una de las mejores. Aquellos recuerdos, sacrosantos hoy porque habían sido reelaborados en las silenciosas estancias del pasado, habían sido parte de la formación que las dos hermanas, huérfanas desde edad muy temprana, tuvieron gracias a su valiente madre de Vermont, que ahora le daba la impresión de haber imaginado, casi como Colón, sin ayuda de nadie, el otro lado del globo. Había escogido Vevey, con una intuición natural y con extraordinaria precisión, sin moverse de Burlington; tras lo cual se había embarcado, había atravesado el océano, desembarcado, explorado, y, por encima de todo, hecho valer su presencia. Había ofrecido a sus hijas los cinco años en Suiza y Alemania que iban a proporcionarles para siempre un punto de comparación con todos los siglos en Catay[9] y a imprimir, sobre todo en la más joven —Susan era la benjamina—, un carácter que, como la señora Stringham había tenido ocasión de repetirse a sí misma a lo largo de la vida, las diferenciaba de las demás. Al menos en el caso de la señora Stringham, para quien era evidente, en los más diversos sentidos, que, gracias a la fe solitaria, previsora y firme de su madre, se había convertido en una mujer de mundo. Muchas mujeres eran muchas cosas que ella no era, pero no mujeres de mundo e

ignoraban que ella sí (lo cual le gustaba mucho porque le permitía relegarlas aún más), y ni siquiera eran conscientes de que eso le permitía juzgarlas. Nunca se había visto tanto a sí misma desde esa perspectiva como en esa fase de aquel peregrinaje un tanto azaroso; y tal vez fuese esa sensación lo que hizo que insistiera en detenerse allí con más vehemencia de la que fue consciente. Los días irrecuperables habían regresado desde muy lejos, formaban parte de la sensación del aire helado de las cumbres y de todo lo que impregnaba como un aroma inalterable el vestido desgarrado de la juventud: el privilegio de beber aquella leche dulce como la miel, el ruido de los cencerros de las vacas y el rumor de los arroyos, la fragancia de las hierbas aromáticas al pisarlas y el vértigo de los profundos abismos.

Era evidente que Milly también lo notaba, aunque en su compañera —la señora Stringham lo habría expresado así— causaban el mismo efecto que habría podido producir la princesa de una tragedia al uso en su confidente, si le hubiese estado permitido experimentar una emoción personal. Que una princesa sólo podía ser una princesa era una verdad con la que, en esencia, una confidente, por sensible que fuese, tenía que acostumbrarse a vivir. La señora Stringham podía ser una mujer de mundo, pero Milly era una princesa, la única con la que había tenido que tratar, y eso, a su manera, también suponía una gran diferencia. Era un destino que no podía estar más claro para la interesada, que lo sobrellevaba con mucha dignidad. Posiblemente, la soledad que llevaba aparejada y otros misterios representaran el peso bajo el que le parecía ver que su compañera inclinaba a veces con tanta resignación la cabeza. Durante el almuerzo, Milly había accedido a quedarse y le había encargado buscar habitaciones, disponerlo todo y asegurarse de que se ocuparan de los caballos y el carruaje; tareas que habían recaído de forma natural sobre la señora Stringham y que por algún motivo, en esa ocasión particular, la habían hecho ser consciente —de una manera amable, espléndida y casi majestuosa— de lo que significaba vivir con los grandes. Su joven amiga tenía en un grado sublime el don de inhibirse ante la cuestión general de las dificultades, aunque no era que se librara de ellas, como tantas personas encantadoras, descargándolas en otros. Las mantenía a distancia y nunca llegaban a entrar en su esfera; ni la confidente más quejosa habría podido introducirlas, y ser su confidente equivalía a vivir tan al margen como ella. En otras palabras, cuidarla resultaba tan sencillo que era como vivir en la corte pero sin servilismo. Por supuesto, todo se reducía a la cuestión del dinero y a estas alturas nuestra observadora dama ya se había hecho varias veces la reflexión de que, cuando se hablaba de «diferencias», al fin y al cabo, era sólo eso y ninguna otra cosa lo que las causaba. No podría haber imaginado una persona menos vulgar, menos preocupada por comprar o aparentar, pero la verdad esencial era que no podía separarse a la joven de su fortuna. Podría haber dejado sola a su concienzuda compañera con la mayor libertad posible, sin preguntar ni aludir jamás a su dinero, pero seguiría notándose en los finos pliegues del caro vestido negro que arrastraba sobre la hierba mientras paseaba sin rumbo y en los curiosos y espléndidos bucles peinados sin respetar lo más mínimo la *mode du jour*[10] que asomaban por debajo de su sombrero, no menos al margen de las modas, con un estilo puramente personal que sugería una especie de aristocrático desaliño; acechaba entre las páginas del volumen intonso pero anticuado de Tauchnitz[11] que había adquirido casi sin darse cuenta antes de partir. No podía desvincular su fortuna de su ropa, ni de sus andares, ni de sus lecturas, ni de lo que pensaba, ni del modo en que sonreía, ni de sus ensoñaciones, ni tampoco apartarla con un suave suspiro. No podría haberse librado de ella por más que lo intentara, pues en eso consistía la verdadera riqueza: en que llegaba a formar parte de tu ser. Como, al cabo de una hora, Milly todavía no había regresado a la casa, la señora Stringham, aunque la tarde acababa de empezar, tomó, con precauciones, la misma dirección y fue a buscarla, por si le apetecía dar un paseo. No obstante, más que el propósito de estar con ella, su intención era respetar la soledad que tal vez prefiriese su amiga, por lo que, una vez más, la buena señora se movió con una discreción que la hizo parecer «disimulada» aun a ella misma. No obstante, no podía evitarlo, y tampoco le importaba, convencida como estaba de que lo que quería en realidad era no extralimitarse y contenerse a tiempo. Si avanzaba con tanto cuidado era para poder parar a tiempo, aunque en esa ocasión se vio obligada a continuar, pues siguió, con cierta preocupación, el sendero que creía que había tomado Milly. Ascendía sinuoso por una pendiente hasta los prados alpinos por los que, en esos últimos días, tantas veces habían querido vagar, al verlos desde arriba o desde abajo; y luego se internaba en un bosque y subía y subía, rumbo a un pequeño grupo de viejas cabañas marrones. La señora Stringham llegó por fin a las cabañas y allí recibió indicaciones suficientes de una perpleja anciana de aspecto temible. Hacía poco que había visto pasar por allí a la joven cerca de la cima y en dirección a un lugar donde el camino volvía a descender, como nuestra intranquila amiga tuvo ocasión de comprobar un cuarto de hora después, de manera brusca y casi alarmante. Debía conducir a alguna parte, pero en apariencia se abismaba en el vacío, pues, desde donde se encontraba ella, la ladera daba la impresión de caer a plomo, aunque quizá condujese a una cornisa fuera del alcance de la vista. Su incertidumbre, no obstante, no duró mucho, pues enseguida reparó en la presencia sobre una roca,

a unos veinte metros de donde se hallaba, del volumen de Tauchnitz que la joven había llevado consigo y que probaba su paso por allí. Había dejado el libro porque le estorbaba, por supuesto, con la intención de recogerlo a la vuelta; pero, dado que no lo había recogido, ¿qué había sido de ella? La señora Stringham, me apresuro a añadir, estaba a punto de averiguarlo; aunque fue pura casualidad que su agitación no delatara su presencia.

Debido al descenso del sendero, y a consecuencia de una curva muy pronunciada oculta por las rocas y los arbustos, el lugar parecía precipitarse en el vacío y convertirse en un «paisaje» puro y simple, un paisaje de gran inmensidad y belleza, aunque vertiginoso y proyectado hacia delante. Milly, ante la promesa de aquel espectáculo, había bajado directamente, sin detenerse hasta tenerlo ante sus ojos, y se había sentado plácidamente en lo que su amiga juzgó el borde mismo del precipicio. El sendero seguía curvándose hacia su destino y el asiento de la joven era una losa de piedra al final de un corto saliente o excrecencia que asomaba sin más sobre el abismo y que por suerte, o por desgracia, era totalmente visible desde allí. La señora Stringham contuvo un grito al comprender el peligro de aquella altura para la joven, que podía tropezar, resbalar, saltar o precipitarse al vacío quién sabe si por un falso movimiento o al volver la cabeza. Por un instante, miles de pensamientos resonaron en los oídos de la pobre señora, pero por suerte no llegaron a los de Milly. Fue una conmoción que dejó inmóvil y sin aliento a la espectadora. Lo primero en lo que pensó fue en la posibilidad de una intención latente —por descabellado que pareciese— en su postura, algún vínculo entre el capricho de Milly y una horrible obsesión oculta. La señora Stringham continuó tan quieta como si el menor ruido o una sola sílaba bastasen para precipitar el fatal sobresalto, pero el lapso de esos pocos segundos tuvo en parte un efecto tranquilizador. Le dio tiempo para asimilar la impresión que se llevó consigo unos minutos después, cuando volvió silenciosamente sobre sus pasos. La impresión de que, si la joven estaba tan ensimismada no era porque estuviese pensando en saltar, sino, por el contrario, porque se hallaba en un estado de exaltación e ilimitado dominio de sí misma que nada bueno podía obtener de la violencia. Estaba contemplando los reinos de la tierra, y, por mareante que fuese en sí mismo el panorama, no era su intención renunciar a ellos. ¿Estaba escogiendo uno o los quería todos? Esa pregunta, antes de que la señora hubiese decidido qué hacer, convirtió en irrelevantes todas las demás, y comprendió, o al menos creyó comprender, que, puesto que llamarla podía ser peligroso, igual que hacer cualquier ruido que pudiera sobresaltarla, lo más seguro sería marcharse igual que había llegado. La observó un rato más, contuvo el aliento y nunca llegó a saber cuánto tiempo había transcurrido.

No mucho probablemente, aunque no le pareció poco, y le dio tanto en que pensar, no sólo mientras regresaba a hurtadillas, sino mientras esperaba en el albergue, que aún seguía dándole vueltas cuando Milly regresó al caer la tarde. La señora Stringham se había detenido en el lugar del sendero donde estaba el Tauchnitz, lo había cogido y, con un lápiz que llevaba sujeto de un cordoncillo, había escrito las palabras *à bientôt!*[12] sobre la cubierta, tras lo cual, pese a lo mucho que tardó en volver la joven, había medido el tiempo sin asomo de preocupación. Pues había comprendido que lo que se había traído de aquella escena era la convicción de que el futuro no sería para su princesa una brusca o sencilla liberación de la condición humana. No sería cuestión de saltar al vacío en busca de una huida rápida, sino de hacer frente a los embates de la vida, y cualquiera habría dicho que estaba pasándoles revista en aquella roca. La señora Stringham pudo decirse durante la todavía larga espera que, si su joven amiga seguía sin llegar, no sería porque —cualquiera que fuese la ocasión que se le presentara— hubiese decidido cortar el hilo de la vida. No habría podido suicidarse porque se sabía inconfundiblemente destinada a algo más complejo; ésa era la visión en mitad de la cual la había sorprendido con cierto espanto. La imagen que había conservado la dama de más edad tenía, pues, el carácter de una revelación. En los angustiosos minutos que había pasado observándola había visto a su compañera bajo una nueva luz: su ideal, su apariencia, sus señales, su historia, su estado, su belleza y su misterio se habían delatado inconscientemente a sí mismos en el aire alpino y habían vuelto a juntarse para alimentar la llama de la señora Stringham. Hay cosas que después entenderemos con mayor claridad y que, de momento, resumiremos mediante el entusiasmo, más fuerte que cualquier duda, de nuestra amiga. No estaba acostumbrada a la sensación de tener una mina de algo precioso bajo los pies. Le parecía hallarse cerca de la entrada todavía sin despejar. Sólo hacía falta explotar la mina para que entregara sus tesoros. Y no era precisamente en el oro de Milly en lo que estaba pensando.

II

A su regreso, la joven no dijo nada sobre las palabras escritas en el Tauchnitz, y la señora Stringham reparó en que no llevaba el libro consigo. Lo había olvidado y lo más probable era que no volviera a acordarse. Su compañera decidió enseguida no contarle que la había seguido; y, asombrosamente, a los cinco minutos de su regreso, se puso en evidencia la preocupación que conllevaba aquel olvido.

—¿Te parecería muy detestable, si te dijese que, después de todo…?

La señora Stringham había pensado ya todo lo que tenía que pensar al oír el tono en que formuló la pregunta y respondió con un ademán de consentimiento que hizo que las palabras de Milly dieran paso a un evidente alivio.

—¿No quieres que nos quedemos, preferirías que continuáramos el viaje? Si es así nos iremos al despuntar el día, o cuando tú quieras; se ha hecho un poco tarde para ponernos en camino ahora —y sonrió para dejar claro que no hablaba en serio al insinuar que la joven pudiera querer partir de inmediato—. Te insistí en que nos quedáramos —añadió—, así que me lo tengo bien merecido.

Milly por lo general celebraba la mayoría de las bromas de su buena amiga, pero en esta ocasión se limitó a asentir con gesto un poco ausente.

—Claro, te pasas la vida insistiéndome.

Y así quedó decidido, sin necesidad de discutirlo más, que reanudarían el viaje por la mañana. El interés de la más joven por los detalles —a pesar de que la mayor afirmó que aceptaría que la llevase a cualquier sitio— pareció desvanecerse justo después; no obstante, prometió que pensaría antes de la cena a qué lugar podían dirigirse, ahora que tenían el mundo por delante (habían pedido que se la sirvieran a la caída del sol para poder estar a la luz de las velas). Las dos estaban de acuerdo en que la luz de las velas en los albergues del camino, en países desconocidos y en mitad de las montañas, tenía una poesía especial: ésas eran las amables aventuras, los refinamientos estéticos que, como ellas habrían dicho, iban buscando. Daba la impresión de que Milly había decidido ir a «acostarse un rato» antes de cenar, pero, tres minutos después, cambió de opinión y preguntó bruscamente, en una transición que pareció un salto de cinco mil kilómetros:

—¿Qué te dijo el doctor Finch en Nueva York, el día nueve, cuando hablaste con él a solas?

Hasta más tarde, la señora Stringham no comprendió por qué la pregunta la había sobresaltado mucho más de lo que explicaba su brusquedad, y la había asustado hasta el punto de estar a punto de mentirle. Tuvo que hacer memoria para recordar la ocasión, el nueve, en Nueva York, cuando había visto al doctor Finch a solas, y recordar las palabras que había pronunciado entonces; y, después de recordarlo, por un momento fue como si le hubiese dicho algo de una importancia crucial, aunque de hecho no había sido así y sólo le había dado la impresión de que iba a hacerlo. El día seis, diez antes de su partida, la señora Stringham había salido precipitadamente de Boston después de recibir la alarmante noticia (que le había causado una impresión no muy grande, pero suficiente) de que Mildred había caído enferma de pronto y de que, por alguna oscura razón, se hallaba tan indispuesta que tal vez hubiese que posponer el viaje. La dolencia había resultado ser muy leve, y se redujo a unas cuantas horas de preocupación; tras lo cual el viaje volvió a ser no sólo posible, sino también un cambio muy recomendable; y, si la celosa invitada había pasado cinco minutos a solas con el médico, no había sido tanto a instancias suyas como de ella. Casi no se habían dicho nada y se habían limitado a expresar su entusiasmo respecto a las propiedades curativas de «Europa»; por lo que, después de recordarlo, pudo tranquilizarla como era debido.

—Nada que no supieras o hubieses podido saber entonces, palabra. No comparto con él ningún secreto. ¿Qué te ha hecho sospecharlo? No sé cómo has podido enterarte de que lo vi a solas.

—No… no me lo contaste —respondió Milly—. Y no me refiero —prosiguió— a las veinticuatro horas que pasé enferma, cuando era natural que conversaseis. Sino a después, cuando mejoré; fue lo último que hiciste antes de volver a Boston.

La señora Stringham siguió igual de perpleja.

—¿Quién te ha contado que fui a verle?

—Él no… ni tú tampoco me lo contaste en tus cartas. Ésta es la primera vez que lo hablamos. ¡Por eso te lo pregunto! —dijo Milly, con un gesto y una voz que, instantes después, revelaron a su compañera que en realidad no lo había sabido, sino sólo conjeturado y, tras aventurarse a preguntarle, había dado en el blanco. Sin embargo, ¿qué le había hecho pensar en eso?—. Aunque, si no te dijo nada —sonrió—, da igual.

—No me dijo nada… No tenía nada que decirme. ¿Es que no te encuentras bien?

La señora Stringham deseaba saber la verdad, aunque lo que acababa de insinuar no parecía encajar con la larga ascensión que había hecho Milly. El rostro de la joven siempre estaba pálido, pero sus amigos ya se habían acostumbrado y, aunque pareciera un poco desmejorada, a menudo estaba radiante. Siguió sonriendo un rato un tanto misteriosamente.

—No sé… la verdad es que no tengo ni idea. Pero tal vez valga la pena averiguarlo.

La compasión de la señora Stringham se encendió.

—¿Te encuentras mal… te duele algo?

—Ni lo más mínimo. Pero a veces quisiera saber si…

—Sí —le insistió—, ¿qué es lo que querrías saber?

—No sé… si me queda mucho.

La señora Stringham la miró admirada.

—Mucho ¿qué? ¿Sufrimiento?

—De todo. De todo lo que tengo.

Nuevamente preocupada, nuestra amiga se esforzó con mucha ternura en entenderla.

—Lo «tienes» todo, así que cuando dices «mucho»…

—Me refiero —le interrumpió la joven— a si lo tendré por mucho tiempo. Si es que lo *tengo*.

Eso pareció confundir un poco, o al menos desconcertar, a su compañera, a quien conmovió, como la conmovía siempre, el desamparo de su elegancia y lo brusco de sus cambios de ánimo, y eso que le pareció percibir cierto tono burlón.

—¿Si tienes una enfermedad?

—Si lo tengo todo —se rio Milly.

—¡Ah!, eso… como casi nadie.

—Y ¿por cuánto tiempo?

La señora Stringham le suplicó con los ojos; se había acercado a ella y la abrazó un poco entre los brazos angustiados.

—¿Quieres consultar con alguien? —Y, como la joven sólo respondió con un leve movimiento de cabeza, aunque tal vez un poco más consciente, añadió—: Iremos directas a ver al mejor médico de la región. —Eso también produjo únicamente una mirada de asentimiento con reparos y un silencio, vago y dulce, que no comprometía a nada. Nuestra amiga perdió la calma—. Dime, por Dios, qué es lo que te aflige.

—No creo que lo tenga todo —dijo Milly como toda explicación, aunque queriendo ser amable.

—Pero ¿qué puedo hacer por ti?

La joven reflexionó y cuando parecía que iba a poder hablar, cambió de pronto y se expresó de forma muy diferente:

—¡Ay, amiga, amiga mía…! ¡Soy demasiado feliz!

Su respuesta volvió a acercarlas, pero también confirmó las dudas de la señora Stringham.

—Entonces ¿qué es lo que te pasa?

—Pues eso… que apenas puedo soportarlo.

—Pero ¿qué es eso que crees no tener?

Milly dudó un instante, luego dio con la respuesta y forzó una leve demostración de alegría.

—¡Fuerzas para soportar la dicha de lo que tengo!

La señora Stringham comprendió que le estaba «dando largas», advirtió su probable ironía y su ternura se renovó con la seriedad de un largo murmullo.

—¿Con quién piensas consultar? —preguntó, como si al pie de aquellas alturas se extendiese un continente de médicos—. ¿Adónde quieres ir primero?

Por tercera vez, Milly pareció reflexionar, pero volvió a repetir la respuesta de unos minutos antes.

—Te lo diré en la cena… Adiós, hasta entonces.

Y salió de la sala con una ligereza que confirmó a su compañera que había algo que la reconfortaba especialmente en la renovada promesa de su partida. Nada más concluir tan extraña conversación, la señora Stringham se sentó a meditar con la aguja de ganchillo, el ovillo de seda y la «delicada» labor que siempre

tenía a mano. Sin duda aquel estado de ánimo tan desconcertante lo había precipitado la interrupción del viaje, con la que la joven no había estado verdaderamente de acuerdo. Una vez admitido que su única queja era un exceso de alegría de vivir, todo encajaba. Esa alegría le impedía detenerse, pero le permitía continuar; y, con el impulso del viaje, volvía a salir a flote y regresaba a sus grandes espacios. Quedarse ahí sentada, mientras avanzaba el crepúsculo, y comprender aún con mayor claridad que su joven amiga gozaba de una situación privilegiada, no era evadirse de la realidad, o al menos eso esperó Susan Shepherd. Como es natural a tanta altitud por las noches refrescaba, y las viajeras habían pedido que les encendieran el fuego a la hora de la cena; la gran ruta alpina imponía su valerosa presencia a través de los pequeños cristales de las ventanas bajas y limpias, con sus anécdotas a la puerta del albergue, la diligencia amarilla, las grandes carretas y los apresurados carruajes particulares con capota, que llevaban a la memoria de nuestra fantasiosa amiga viejas historias, viejas estampas de fugas históricas, huidas, persecuciones, sucesos, acontecimientos que, con una especie de extraña congruencia, la ayudaban a interpretar interesantes significados de esa relación en la que estaba tan profundamente comprometida. Es natural que la evidencia de la situación privilegiada de la que gozaba su compañera le pareciera la mejor conclusión a la que podía llegar, pues ella estaba instalada en su mismo esplendor, como en una carroza —volvía una y otra vez a la misma comparación—, y esa manera de avanzar, la perspectiva desde los cojines púrpuras, sin duda tenía todavía mucho que ofrecer. Cuando encendieron las velas para la cena y echaron las cortas y blancas cortinas, Milly reapareció y la pintoresca salita se colmó de poesía. De este modo, ni siquiera las palabras con las que, sin más pérdida de tiempo, satisfizo a su paciente amiga, quebraron su encanto:

—Quiero ir directamente a Londres.

Fue algo inesperado que no se correspondía con los planes que habían hecho a su partida; cuando Inglaterra, por el contrario, les había parecido, como quien dice, relegada y pospuesta, reservada para el final de un largo camino de preparativos y presentaciones. Londres, en suma, iba a ser la coronación del viaje, y la conquistarían, como por asedio, mediante una serie de avances progresivos. El atajo tomado por Milly era si cabe aún más apasionante, como le parecía siempre cualquier simplificación a la señora Stringham; que además recordaría después, como si fuesen parte de la mismísima «exposición» tan cara al dramaturgo, las palabras con que la chica, entre las velas humeantes, había expresado su preferencia y otras cosas que habían aparecido, aparecido con el ruido que se oía de los cascos de los caballos, el traqueteo de los cubos y las preguntas extranjeras, las respuestas extranjeras, que formaban parte del mismo modo de la alegre conversación del viaje. La joven lo dijo en verdad como si fuese una confesión muy grave, algo que le avergonzaba reconocer y que la hacía parecer frívola; había comprendido que lo que le interesaba de Europa era, dentro de lo posible, la «gente», y, si de verdad su amiga quería saberlo, era esa visión equívoca lo que la había obsesionado los días anteriores en los museos y las iglesias, y lo que le estaba impidiendo disfrutar del paisaje. Le encantaban los paisajes… sí, pero quería que fuesen humanos y personales, y se le ocurría que Londres era, sin duda, el mejor sitio para encontrarlos. Volvió a insistir en su idea de que si no le quedaba mucho —si nada iba a durarle demasiado— esa ciudad tendría mucho que ofrecerle y supondría menos derroche de lo que pudiera quedarle que cualquier otra. Dejó caer esa última consideración con tanta alegría que en esta ocasión la señora Stringham no se desconcertó, y de hecho estuvo dispuesta —ya que había salido a relucir la posibilidad de una muerte antes de tiempo— a darle la réplica y departir sobre su propio futuro. De modo que comerían y beberían por lo que pudiese ocurrir mañana; y, a partir de ese momento, se regirían por la perspectiva de esos banquetes y libaciones. De hecho, aquella noche comieron y bebieron en consonancia con el espíritu de esa decisión, y, antes de que se retirasen a dormir, se habían despejado los nubarrones entre las dos.

Tal vez se despejaran sobre un paisaje demasiado grande, al menos en proporción a los indicios de vida que ofrecía. Cuando Milly se refería a la «gente» no quería decir que quisiera trabar relación con personas concretas, y el hecho seguía siendo que, cuando desembarcasen en Dover, serían dos completas desconocidas rodeadas de desconocidos. Todavía no tenían relación con nadie; la señora Stringham hizo esa objeción para ver qué efecto producía. Al principio no produjo ninguno, excepto la observación de la joven de que su intención no era frecuentar a gente de mundo ni entrar en contacto con ella; nada más lejos de sus deseos que las oportunidades que por lo general veían sus compatriotas en un baúl lleno de cartas de recomendación. No era cuestión, en suma, de frecuentar a la gente que aspiraban a conocer sus compatriotas; sino la vida inglesa y las personas en sí mismas, tal como se presentasen, el mundo concreto deducido con tanto cariño por sus lecturas y ensoñaciones. La señora Stringham hizo plena justicia a ese mundo concreto, pero, cuando se presentó la ocasión, no dejó de señalar que tal vez sería útil conocer de antemano a una o dos de las partículas humanas de dicha concreción. No obstante, no consiguió, como se dice vulgarmente, «camelarse» a Milly, así que no le quedó más remedio que poner las cartas sobre la mesa.

—¿No me dijiste que le habías hecho una especie de promesa al señor Densher?

Por un momento, la mirada de Milly al oírla sólo pudo significar una de dos cosas: o que no recordaba la promesa, o que el nombre del señor Densher no le decía nada. Pero su interlocutora comprendió enseguida que no podía haber olvidado la promesa sin asociarla a alguien; para poder negarla tenía que habérsela hecho a alguien. El caso era que sí recordaba al señor Merton Densher, aquel joven inglés tan «brillante», que se había presentado en Nueva York con no se sabe qué ocupación literaria, poco antes de su partida, y que había estado tres o cuatro veces en su casa en el breve período que medió entre su visita a Boston y la posterior estancia en Nueva York de la señora Stringham; pero hizo falta que le refrescara mucho la memoria antes de que recordase haberle hablado a su amiga de la esperanza expresada por el joven de que no cometería jamás la crueldad de ir a Londres sin —como suele decirse— «retomar el contacto». Ella le permitió abrigar esa esperanza, aunque la manera en que la formuló le había parecido, y le seguía pareciendo, un tanto petulante; no hizo nada ni para desanimarle ni para alentarle; aunque en aquel entonces la señora Stringham lamentó no haber podido conocer al señor Densher. Había pensado en él después, y había advertido que Milly no parecía haberlo hecho, pues en tal caso se habría delatado; e, interesada como estaba por todo lo que concernía a Milly, había llegado a la conclusión, por su cuenta y de manera más bien gratuita, que, de no haber sido por las interrupciones, el joven inglés habría llegado a ser más que un amigo. Que lo conociese había sido uno de los indicios que, ya desde el principio, prestaron simpatía y encanto a aquella joven con el mundo por delante. Sola, sin madre, desamparada, pero con los sólidos recursos de su enorme mansión, su gigantesca fortuna y su no menos inmensa libertad, había empezado a «recibir», a pesar de su juventud, como una mujer madura, igual que las princesas que, por motivos de interés público, llegan antes de tiempo a la mayoría de edad. Si la señora Stringham sabía que el señor Densher había partido a algún sitio por motivos de trabajo antes de su propia visita a Nueva York, tampoco se le ocultaba que había vuelto uno o dos días, después de su segunda visita a Nueva York; que había regresado, en suma, una vez, de camino hacia el oeste, hacia Washington, según tenía entendido, aunque ya no estaba cuando ella volvió a casa de su amiga antes de la partida. Nunca había exagerado, de hecho se creía incapaz de hacerlo, pero esa noche le pareció que había habido suficiente en esa relación para suscitar y despertar la sospecha de algo más.

Así pues, le dio a entender a su amiga que, con promesa o sin ella, en caso de apuro, y una vez en Londres, podría tomarle la palabra y mandarle llamar; a lo cual Milly respondió enseguida que esa posibilidad, aunque evidente, no serviría de mucho, pues dicho caballero sin duda seguiría en Norteamérica. Tenía muchas cosas que hacer y lo más seguro era que ni las hubiese empezado; y, de hecho, a ella no se le habría ocurrido ir a Londres de no haber estado segura de que todavía tardaría en volver. Su compañera comprendió que, si la joven había llegado a admitir eso, era porque tenía la sensación de haber ido demasiado lejos; y no contribuyó a arreglarlo que añadiese, sin demasiada presencia de ánimo, que lo último que quería era dar la impresión de estar corriendo tras él. La señora Stringham se preguntó para sus adentros a qué venía aquello y —aunque entendió de pronto el peligro— no dijo nada, sólo otras cosas como, por ejemplo, que si el señor Densher estaba fuera no había más que hablar, o que tenían que ser discretas a toda costa. Pero ¿hasta qué punto debían serlo y cómo podían estar seguras? Así que sacó a relucir su propio caso: ella también tenía un posible vínculo con Londres, que no quería descartar, aunque tampoco se atrevía a contar con él. Y, como colofón de la cena, le contó a su amiga la historia de Maud Manningham, la extraña, pero interesante, joven inglesa con quien había trabado amistad en los días del colegio en Vevey; y con quien, cuando se despidieron, había seguido escribiéndose con regularidad hasta que, después de algunas fluctuaciones, habían dejado de hacerlo; aunque, por un tiempo, su correspondencia había sido un ejemplo de pura constancia, y, de hecho, se había renovado con ocasión de la boda de ambas. Entonces habían vuelto a escribirse de manera precisa y afectuosa. Primero había empezado la señora Lowder, y luego habían intercambiado una o dos cartas más. Eso, no obstante, había sido el final, aunque sin ruptura, sólo con el cese apacible de su relación: tenía entendido que Maud Manningham se había casado muy bien, mientras que el suyo había sido un matrimonio mucho más humilde; además la distancia, los distintos intereses y la imposibilidad de verse y de tratarse habían hecho el resto. Sólo después de todos esos años, el encuentro había empezado a parecerle posible, suponiendo, claro, que la otra parte siguiera con vida. Eso era lo que le parecía interesante comprobar, tal como, preguntando aquí y allá, creía poder hacer. Era un experimento que haría si Milly no tenía objeción.

Por lo general, Milly no ponía objeciones y, aunque le hizo un par de preguntas, no tuvo inconveniente. Esas preguntas —o al menos sus propias respuestas— despertaron en la señora Stringham muchas reminiscencias del pasado: hasta esa noche, no había caído en lo mucho que recordaba, ni en lo mucho que le apetecía comprobar qué había sido de la corpulenta y colorada Maud, tan lozana, rara y extravagante que

le había parecido encantadora ya de adolescente. Existía el peligro —admitió con franqueza— de que su temperamento no hubiese madurado con los años para adquirir mayor distinción; era un peligro que siempre convenía tener en cuenta al reanudar una relación. Atar cabos sueltos suponía correr un riesgo, para el que no obstante estaba preparada, si Milly lo estaba. La posible «diversión», confesó, resultaba tentadora en sí misma; e imprimió un tono a sus palabras —un poco animada como estaba— como subrayando que tenía derecho a divertirse después de cincuenta años de virtud de Nueva Inglaterra. Una de las cosas que recordaría después sería la mirada indescriptible que le dirigió su joven amiga; ella seguía sentada entre las velas delante del plato vacío y Milly deambulaba por el comedor, y esa mirada representó largo tiempo para ella un inescrutable comentario sobre su propia idea de la libertad. No obstante, invitada a expresar su opinión, Milly demostró, tal vez de manera un tanto pensativa y encantadora, que, aunque llevara un rato sin decir nada, la inesperada historia de su amiga sacada como una carta de la manga, la había en parte sorprendido y seducido. Y, puesto que dependía de eso, antes de ir a acostarse, le soltó un frívolo:

—¡Arriésgalo todo!

Su tono pareció quitar peso a la presencia evocada de Maud Lowder, y Susan Stringham, todavía sentada a la mesa, todavía en animada reflexión, se hizo cargo un poco mejor de la situación. Algo determinante le ocurrió, en cuanto se retiró la joven, algo inefable, pero al mismo tiempo coercitivo. Fue como si volviese a ser consciente, con toda la plenitud del tiempo, de que, después de la boda de Maud, ésta la había olvidado o, como decía ahora la gente, relegado. La señora Lowder la había dejado atrás y, con ocasión de la misma circunstancia en su propia vida —no la segunda, la triste, dotada de la dignidad de la tristeza, sino la primera con la estrechez de su supuesta felicidad— la había compadecido, siempre con el mismo espíritu, casi con condescendencia. Si dicha sospecha no había desaparecido del todo, ni siquiera cuando había dejado de tener importancia, era extraño que pareciese ahora un eslabón y no otro corte en la cadena; y, de haber sido otro su estado de ánimo, la cada vez más acusada condescendencia de su antigua compañera de estudios habría decidido la cuestión de otra forma muy distinta. En realidad la decidieron —suponiendo que valga la pena pararse a analizarlo— la feliz consumación, la justicia poética y la venganza generosa de que por fin tenía algo que enseñarle. Maud, cuando se despidieron, parecía tener mucho y ahora —¿no era ésa, en general, la ley que regía para los ricos la vida inglesa?— tendría, gracias a diversas adiciones, promociones y expansiones, muchísimo más. Muy bien, estupendo, ella sabría estar a la altura. Fuese lo que fuese lo que la señora Lowder pudiera exhibir —y era de esperar que hiciese justicia a sus cálculos— no tendría nada parecido a Milly Theale, el trofeo que exhibiría la pobre Susan. La pobre Susan no se acostó hasta que las velas se consumieron, y, en cuanto quitaron la mesa, abrió su pulcro portafolio. No había perdido el hilo; recordaba contactos y direcciones donde probar suerte, no había más que ponerse manos a la obra. Sin más dilación, se puso a escribir.

Libro IV

I

Después todo había ido tan deprisa que Milly no dijo sino la pura verdad cuando le comentó al caballero que tenía a su derecha —sentado a su vez a la izquierda de la anfitriona— que aún no sabía muy bien dónde se encontraba, palabras que daban a entender que por primera vez tenía la plena sensación de encontrarse ante una escena verdaderamente novelesca. Ella y su amiga estaban cenando ya en Lancaster Gate, rodeadas, o eso le pareció, de tantos detalles ingleses como pudieran desear; y eso que hasta hacía muy poco ni siquiera conocía la existencia de la señora Lowder y menos aún de su notable personalidad. A Susie, como últimamente le había dado por llamar de manera un tanto frívola a su compañera, le había bastado con agitar su varita para que empezara de inmediato un cuento de hadas en el que brillaba —pues en eso se había traducido el éxito de la señora Stringham— en su papel de hada madrina. Milly casi había insistido en vestirla como tal para la ocasión; y, si la buena señora no se había presentado varita mágica en mano, con un sombrero puntiagudo, una capa corta y unos zapatos con diamantes en las hebillas, no había sido por falta de ganas de la joven. La buena señora parecía no obstante tan satisfecha como si luciera tales insignias; y la observación que le hizo Milly a lord Mark fue sin duda el resultado de un leve cruce de miradas, que ni siquiera la enorme longitud de la mesa había podido impedir. Había veinte personas entre las dos, pero aquel largo intercambio fue la consecuencia más sutil de aquel otro intercambio de opiniones cuando se detuvieron en el paso entre las montañas suizas. Milly casi tenía la sensación de que su suerte se había precipitado un poco más de la cuenta, como si después de aventurarse a hacer una pequeña broma hubiera recibido una respuesta de una gravedad desproporcionada. En ese instante, por ejemplo, no habría sabido decir si esa agudización de sus percepciones la hacía sentir más animada o más angustiada; y su situación, de hecho, habría sido más grave si, por suerte, no hubiese decidido, nada más ver asomar el peligro, que lo más importante era no buscar ni evitar nada, ni siquiera sorprenderse demasiado, sino dejar que las cosas sucediesen, pues no cabían demasiadas dudas sobre el resultado.

Le había presentado a lord Mark antes de la cena, no la señora Lowder, sino la hermosa joven, sobrina de dicha dama, que estaba ahora al otro extremo de la mesa, en el mismo lado que Susie; lord Mark la había acompañado a la mesa y su intención era preguntarle por la señorita Croy, aquella joven tan guapa que tenía delante y a quien ella no había visto —en esta ocasión estaba espléndida— más que dos veces. La primera había sido con motivo de la visita que les hizo en el hotel en compañía de su tía y que había causado a nuestras otras dos heroínas una honda impresión de belleza y elegancia. Dicha impresión había sido tan duradera que, aunque Milly estaba pendiente de todo, sus ojos se posaban, cuando no miraba a Susie, en especial sobre Kate Croy. Los ojos de tan maravillosa criatura —había alcanzado enseguida ese rango— buscaban también los suyos, y parte del rápido éxito de las dos visitantes norteamericanas parecía basarse en lo franca y encantadoramente consciente que era Kate de la posibilidad de que llegasen a ser amigas. Como invitada, Milly había hecho la amable generalización de que las jóvenes inglesas tenían una pronunciada belleza que destacaba cuando llevaban vestido de noche, sobre todo cuando, como era el caso en esta ocasión, el vestido era lo que debía ser. Pensaba decírselo a lord Mark cuando llegara, al cabo de un poco, el momento de tocar el tema. Y su impresión era que tendrían ocasión de tocar muchos temas pues, enfrascada como estaba en animada conversación con su otro vecino de mesa, su anfitriona no parecía que fuese a molestarles. El vecino de la señora Lowder era el obispo de Murrum, un obispo de verdad, como Milly no había visto nunca; con su peculiar vestimenta, una voz como un instrumento antiguo de viento y un rostro que era el auténtico retrato de un prelado; mientras que el caballero sentado a la izquierda de nuestra joven señorita, un caballero de cuello grueso, corpulento y literal que miraba hacia delante como si no quisiera dejarse distraer con palabras vanas, era claramente una compensación por haberla sentado al lado de lord Mark. Mientras Milly consideraba todas estas cosas, con una leve exaltación por el modo en que había encajado, comprendió lo justificados que estaban su amor a la vida y su alegato a favor de

conocer gente. Ahora veía que no era tan difícil como parecía meterse en la corriente, o al menos quedarse en la orilla. Era fácil acercarse —si es que estaban cerca— y sin embargo esos elementos eran muy distintos de los que ella conocía, y también muy exquisitos y extraños.

Se preguntó si su vecino de la derecha entendería a lo que se refería con esa descripción si se lo explicara, aunque otra de las cosas que intuyó fue precisamente que no debía hacerlo. No obstante, a estas alturas ya tenía claro que su estrategia consistiría en ser inteligente; y, sin duda, lo más interesante sería apreciar los nuevos efectos y referencias tanto de la inteligencia como de la sencillez de la gente. La certidumbre —nunca había sido tan clara— de que iba a volcarse de lleno hacía que se emocionara, se ruborizase y volviera a palidecer: tanto el ambiente del comedor como el esplendor de la ocasión tenían para ella unos ecos muy claros y un tono muy profundo. Las cosas más insignificantes, los rostros, las manos y las joyas de las mujeres; las palabras, sobre todo los nombres, que se oían al otro lado de la mesa; la forma de los tenedores, el arreglo de las flores, la actitud de los criados o las paredes del salón, eran como las pinceladas de un cuadro o las indicaciones escénicas en una obra de teatro y subrayaban la agudeza de su visión. Estaba casi convencida de no haberse hallado nunca en ese estado de exaltación, su sensibilidad resultaba casi incómoda; había, por ejemplo, más indicaciones de las que podía catalogar en la actitud de la amable sobrina, que le parecía tan distinguida e interesante como sorprendentemente cordial. Era evidente que la joven tenía otras posibilidades; sin embargo allí, por voluntad propia, había esbozado ya una relación. ¿Reanudarían la señorita Croy y ella la historia donde la habían dejado sus mayores tantos años antes? ¿Descubrirían que se apreciaban mutuamente e intentarían desarrollar aquella fidelidad según criterios más modernos? Al llegar a Inglaterra había dudado de Maud Manningham y había pensado que era un recurso vago y un tallo cortado, había creído que su dependencia de ella sería un estado mental vergonzoso y tonto —en tanto que una dependencia—, por haber aspirado a algo tan inane como «entrar en sociedad». Le parecía inconcebible haber hecho semejante peregrinación para disfrutar de la compañía que pudiera estar reservándoles la señora Lowder, cuando el motivo que la había llevado hasta allí era su curiosidad por otras cosas. Ella habría descrito esta curiosidad como un deseo de ver los sitios de los que había leído, y esa descripción de sus motivos era la que estaba dispuesta a darle a su vecino… aunque, como consecuencia, descubriera lo poco que había leído. En ese momento era casi como si sus pobres previsiones se hubiesen visto frustradas por el esplendor —no podía llamarlo de otro modo— de la ocasión, o en cualquier caso por la impresionante personalidad (tampoco podía calificarla de otro modo) de los dos personajes principales. La señora Lowder y su sobrina, por diferentes que fuesen, tenían al menos en común que ambas eran una realidad evidente. Sobre todo era cierto de la tía, tanto que a Milly le habría gustado saber cómo, años atrás, su amiga podía haber hecho una amistad tan extraña; sin embargo, tenía la sensación de que la señora Lowder era de esas personas que la inteligencia puede llegar a conocer en uno o dos días. Al menos se quedaría sentada e imponente mientras una lo intentaba; mientras que la señorita Croy, la hermosa sobrina, llevaría a cabo incontables movimientos que podrían interferir con los intentos. No por eso dejaba de ser divertida, testaruda y amenazante, igual que todas las demás personas y objetos; y, sin duda, las dos amigas se lo tenían merecido por haberse lanzado a la aventura.

No obstante, entretanto, la inteligencia de lord Mark había estado lo bastante a la altura de la de Milly para advertirla de lo poco que podía hacer por aclarar su situación. Le explicó —o al menos le dio a entender— que en esos tiempos nadie en Londres sabía dónde se encontraba. Todo el mundo estaba en todas partes y nadie estaba en ninguna. Él mismo se vería en un aprieto —sí, lo decía con toda franqueza— si tuviese que poner nombre a la «camarilla» de su anfitriona. ¿Era, de hecho una camarilla o no? ¿O es que ya no había camarillas en Londres? ¿Había algo que no fuesen los tanteos y manoseos, como las olas de un mar grasiento en mitad del canal de la Mancha, de una masa de gente confundida que no sabía lo que quería ni adónde se dirigía? Planteó aquellas preguntas tan grandilocuentes y Milly tuvo la sensación de que, en los últimos cinco minutos, había planteado otras muchas, aunque sin responder a ninguna; tal vez fuese sugerente, pero no la ayudaba a discriminar lo más mínimo; hablaba como si un exceso de experiencia le impidiera responderlas. Estaba, pues, en una situación contraria a la suya, pero, precisamente por ello, no menos perdido y desorientado; aunque, a pesar de esa incoherencia, que ella supuso que debía de tener sus razones, resultaba tan real como la señora Lowder o Kate. La única luz bajo la que lord Mark colocaba a la primera era la de una mujer extraordinaria, una mujer de lo más extraordinario, y «tanto más cuanto mejor se la conoce», mientras que de la segunda no dijo nada de momento, aunque era tremendamente, sí, tremendamente, guapa. Milly pensó que tal vez hiciese falta tiempo para que la conversación de aquel joven revelara su inteligencia, en cuyo misterio creía cada vez más, a pesar de lo que le había insinuado su anfitriona al presentárselo. Tal vez fuese uno de esos casos de los que había oído hablar en su país, uno de esos casos característicos de inglés que oculta sus cartas más de lo que parece. Incluso el señor Densher lo

hacía un poco. Pero, en cualquier caso, ¿qué era lo que hacía tan real a lord Mark si se trataba sólo un truco que, por lo visto, dominaba a la perfección? En cierto sentido, su ideal, como si tuviera una vida, una necesidad y una intención propias, le permitía no exhibir la menor vivacidad; con eso bastaba. Era difícil adivinar su edad y discernir si era un joven que parecía viejo o, por el contrario, un viejo que parecía joven; su calvicie y otras cosas que podemos haber insinuado, como que era un poco rancio, o dicho con más delicadeza, un poco seco, no parecían probar nada: había en él una inquietud delicada, y sus ojos, a veces —aunque podían perder muy deprisa su brillo— eran tan claros e ingenuos como los de un niño bueno. Muy atildado, pálido y tan rubio que el único indicio de que llevaba bigote era que no paraba de atusárselo —lo que no dejaba de ser también un gesto casi infantil—, le habría parecido la persona más intelectual entre los presentes si no le hubiese parecido también la más frívola. Esta última cualidad se notaba en su mirada más que en ninguna otra cosa, aunque siempre llevaba puestos los anteojos, que no podían ser más bostonianos y circunspectos.

La idea de su frivolidad tenía que ver sin duda con su título, que simbolizaba —de manera aún un poco confusa para nuestra joven— su relación con un patriciado histórico, una clase que, a su vez, de forma también confusa, representaba una afinidad con un elemento social que ella siempre había oído calificar de «elegante». El supremo elemento social en Nueva York siempre se había visto reducido a esa categoría, y aunque Milly era consciente de que, aplicada a la aristocracia política y territorial, la etiqueta probablemente fuese demasiado simple, de momento no tenía a mano ninguna otra. Cierto que enseguida enriqueció su idea con la percepción de que su interlocutor era indiferente; pero eso, a pesar de la notoria indiferencia de todas las aristocracias, no la llevó a ninguna parte, pues intuyó, en primer lugar, que se sentía a gusto con ella, y en segundo que estaba pensando sólo en sus propios asuntos. Si, por un lado, no la perdía de vista y por el otro se ocupaba de otras cosas —la prueba era el modo en que desmenuzaba el pan —, ¿por qué se cernía sobre ella como un noble potencialmente insolente? No habría sabido cómo responder a esa pregunta, de entre las muchas que le zumbaban en la cabeza. Tal vez hubiese dicho que las complicaba el hecho de que lord Mark hubiera sabido desde el primer momento que era extranjera y norteamericana, y que se hubiera comportado como si ella y sus semejantes fuesen la base de su alimentación. Con amabilidad, pero también de manera implacable e imperturbable, había actuado como si eso fuera lo más normal del mundo, y saber que había visitado y recorrido su país no le sirivió de ninguna ayuda. No podría explicarse, excusarse o jactarse de nada: ser extranjera no la ayudaría ni a huir ni a imponerse; puestos a eso, lord Mark tenía más que enseñarle que lo que podía aprender de ella. Por ejemplo, por qué era tan distinta de la guapa joven, a la que no conocía y de la que sólo acertaba a intuir esa diferencia; o, en el peor de los casos, por qué la joven era tan distinta de ella.

No obstante, de todo eso hablarían después; lo que hablaron entonces, a pesar de la vaguedad exhibida por pura conveniencia por lord Mark, no pudo estar más claro. Ella estaba ya, le comentó, pensando en lo que iba a decirle a su vecino del otro lado, como hacían siempre los norteamericanos. En conciencia, no tenía por qué hablarle; pero los norteamericanos lo ignoraban igual que, pobres criaturas (fue ella quien añadió lo de «pobres criaturas»), ignoraban lo que no había que hacer. ¡Qué cargas se echaban encima y cuántas complicaciones se buscaban! Aquella pulla fácil, pero en el fondo amistosa, contra su pueblo fue para ella un reconocimiento personal, hasta donde podía desearlo, por parte de su nuevo amigo; y Milly le proporcionó un ejemplo rápido y consciente de preocupación morbosa cuando insistió en que su propio deseo de ser «encantadora» se basaba en el modo tan encantador en que la había recibido la señora Lowder. Eso interesó mucho a lord Mark y, hasta más tarde, Milly no se dio cuenta de que le había dado mucha más información sobre su amiga que él a ella. También eso tuvo una nota característica: desde el momento en que se había zambullido en las oscuras profundidades de una sociedad más antigua, se había encontrado con el interesante fenómeno de unos motivos complicados y posiblemente siniestros. No obstante, Maud Manningham (su nombre, incluso en su presencia, seguía alimentando en cierto modo esa fantasía) había sido encantadora, y ella quería corresponder. Había ido a verlas a su hotel mucho antes de que ellas —eran dos— pensaran que podía haber recibido su carta. Por supuesto, habían escrito con anticipación, pero también habían viajado muy deprisa. Las había invitado a cenar apenas dos días después y, a la mañana siguiente, sin esperar a que correspondiesen, ni ninguna otra cosa, se había presentado a visitarlas acompañada de su sobrina. Era como si de verdad se preocupara por ellas movida por una loable fidelidad a la señora Stringham, la amiga y antigua compañera de estudios de la señora Lowder, la dama de rostro encantador y vestido más bien recatado que estaba al otro extremo de la mesa.

Lord Mark contempló a través de sus anteojos las armoniosas cualidades de Susie.

—Pero ¿no es igualmente loable la fidelidad de la señora Stringham?

—Bueno, es un sentimiento muy hermoso; pero no tiene nada que ofrecer.

—¿No la tiene a usted? —preguntó casi al instante lord Mark.

—¿A mí… para obsequiar a la señora Lowder? —Fue evidente que Milly no se le había ocurrido que pudieran utilizarla así—. Oh, no valgo mucho como regalo; e, incluso si así fuera, no tengo la sensación de que me haya regalado.

—Pero la ha exhibido y, si nuestra amiga se aprovecha de usted, todo se reduce a la misma cosa —lord Mark hacía sus bromas sin divertirse, aunque no era precisamente adusto—. Tiene que admitir que, en cuanto la ve, la gente quiere conocerla; y, si es cuestión de dejarse ver, aquí está usted otra vez. Sólo que la han arrancado de las manos de su amiga; quien se beneficia ahora es la señora Lowder. Mire a los invitados y verá que todos quieren conocerla.

—Bueno —dijo Milly—, también tengo la sensación de que prefiero eso a que se burlen de mí.

Una de las cosas que comprendería después —Milly siempre veía las cosas *a posteriori*— fue que su compañero de mesa le había expresado su respeto de un modo muy personal y distinto del de los demás. Le habría gustado saber cómo lo había hecho, sin necesidad de quejas ni disculpas. Pero se dijo que en cualquier caso la había animado a seguir hablando, y que lo más curioso había sido la pregunta con que lo había hecho:

—¿La conoce a usted bien?

—No, sólo nos tiene aprecio.

Ni siquiera eso hizo reír a aquel noble viajado, curtido y hastiado.

—Me refiero a usted en particular. Esa señora de rostro tan encantador, que sin duda es ella misma encantadora, ¿se lo ha contado a la señora Lowder?

Milly miró a su alrededor.

—¿Qué?

—Todo.

Su manera de decirlo, volvió a emocionarla considerablemente e hizo que, por un momento, tuviera la sensación de que le estaba haciendo sorprendentes revelaciones. Aunque enseguida encontró una respuesta.

—Tendrá que preguntárselo a ella.

—¿A su inteligente compañera?

—A la señora Lowder.

Él replicó que su anfitriona era alguien con quien no convenía tomarse ciertas libertades, aunque él era un privilegiado, porque casi siempre se mostraba amable con él y, si era bueno durante un tiempo, probablemente se lo diría.

—Entretanto, me interesa ver qué es lo que hace con usted. Eso me dirá más o menos lo que sabe.

Milly siguió su razonamiento… que era lúcido, pero parecía sugerir algo más.

—Y ¿qué sabe de usted?

—Nada —respondió sin inmutarse lord Mark—. Pero eso no afecta a sus manejos conmigo. —Y, anticipándose a la pregunta de Milly sobre dichos manejos, añadió—: Esto, por ejemplo: sentarme a su lado.

La joven pensó.

—¿Quiere decir que no lo habría hecho de haber sabido que…?

Él respondió como si no le faltara un punto de razón.

—No. Para hacerle justicia, creo que lo habría hecho de todos modos. Así que puede usted estar tranquila.

Milly aprovechó de inmediato su permiso.

—¿Porque, incluso en el peor de los casos, es usted lo mejor que puede ofrecer?

Eso consiguió divertirle por fin.

—Lo era hasta su llegada. Ahora la mejor es usted.

Fue raro que sus palabras le diesen la impresión de que sabía de lo que hablaba, pero así fue; hasta el punto de que las creyó, no sin cierta perplejidad. De hecho, eso sería lo que mejor recordaría de aquel primer encuentro: que aceptó, casi con impotencia —como si se rindiera a lo inevitable—, ser el tipo de cosa, como habría dicho él, que el joven creía haber visto de sobra, a efectos prácticos, en sus vagabundeos. Además, como es natural su humildad no disminuyó cuando supo después que había realizado, justo antes de que ella surgiera de la oscuridad de la extrema juventud, tres visitas seguidas a Nueva York, donde había hecho muchos amigos y contactos. Su impresión, su recuerdo de aquella variopinta colección, seguía siendo bastante vivo. Le había ayudado a situarla, y Milly cada vez era más consciente de que la había empujado —como si hubiera cerrado bruscamente la puerta a sus espaldas y el revisor hubiese alzado la mano para advertir al jefe de estación— al compartimento en que debía viajar en su imaginación. Muchas jóvenes se habrían ofendido al verse encasilladas de esa manera, pero la cualidad de espíritu que permitía a nuestra

joven observar y aceptar las cosas era precisamente uno de sus encantos. Milly prácticamente acababa de saber por él, había comprendido, por así decirlo, desde su compartimento, que la tenía por una de las propiedades más valiosas de su amiga. Era un éxito, a eso se reducía, le aseguró él enseguida; y en eso consistía ser un éxito: en que siempre sucedía antes de que te dieras cuenta. No saberlo era a menudo lo mejor.

—Aún no ha tenido usted tiempo —dijo—, esto no es nada. Pero ya lo entenderá. Lo entenderá todo. Puede usted… ya sabe, todo lo que haya pensado.

Cada vez estaba más sorprendida; casi se sintió como si le estuviese mostrando visiones; y, curiosamente, aunque eran esas visiones lo que la había atraído, no las había tenido en relación —es decir en una relación preliminar y necesaria— con un rostro, unos ojos, una voz y unos modales como los de lord Mark. Por un instante tuvo el efecto de hacer que Milly se preguntara si, justo ahora, iba a tener miedo; pues hubo cincuenta segundos en que lo vio con tanta claridad que la dominó el temor. Ahí estaban otra vez, sí, sin duda: ellas se habían tomado a broma los avances de Susie con la señora Lowder, pero en mitad de la diversión habían accionado un timbre eléctrico que aún seguía sonando. Ahora mismo, en la mesa, le parecía estar oyendo su estrépito, y en esos momentos le extrañó que los demás no lo oyeran. No se quedaban con la mirada fija, no sonreían y el miedo del que hablo no era más que su deseo de detenerlo. No obstante, se calmó como si hubiese callado la propia alarma; le pareció haber comprendido de un vistazo rápido y airado que tenía dos posibilidades: una marcharse de Londres a primera hora de la mañana y la otra no hacer nada. Pues bien, no haría nada, ya lo estaba haciendo; es más, ya lo había hecho y había desaprovechado su oportunidad. Se dejó llevar, tuvo la extraña sensación de estar decidiéndolo allí mismo, pues cambió de dirección antes de seguir hablando con lord Mark. Inexpresivo pero con enorme elocuencia, éste respondió como nadie podría haberlo hecho a la misma pregunta que le había planteado de pronto a la señora Stringham en el Brünig. ¿Seguiría teniendo lo que tenía, fuera esto lo que fuese, mucho más tiempo? Esta había sido la pregunta. «¡Ay! Muy posiblemente no —pareció responder su vecino—; por eso, ¿no lo ve?, ¿yo soy el camino?». Quedó muy claro que tal vez lo fuese, pese a la falta de florituras, y que el camino consistía precisamente en esa falta. Tal vez también lo fuese la joven guapa, a quien no había perdido de vista y que le daba la sensación de que también la estaba observando, pues en ella también se percibía esa falta de florituras, aunque, que pudiera ver, apenas tuviese otra cosa en común con lord Mark. Sin embargo, ¿cómo expresar, qué entendía una y, ya puestos, de qué era consciente, aparte de que ambos representaban en cierto sentido la misma cosa? Kate Croy, guapa, pero amable, la miraba como si realmente adivinase el efecto que estaba causando en ella lord Mark. Si de verdad podía adivinarlo, ¿qué sabía de dicho efecto y hasta qué punto lo había sentido ella misma? ¿Representaba para ellos algo en particular y debía interpretarlo como si esa doble inteligencia duplicara e intensificara la relación en la que se estaba sumergiendo? Era muy raro que hubiese tenido que reconocer tan deprisa y de un solo vistazo los diversos síntomas de una relación; y esa anomalía en sí misma, si hubiese podido dedicarle más tiempo, podría haberle dado a entender de un modo casi terrible que su destino era vivir deprisa. Era, extrañamente, cuestión de corto plazo y su conciencia se abarrotaba proporcionalmente.

Eran unas divagaciones inmensas para el espíritu de una joven en una simple cena de la señora Lowder; pero ¿qué podía ser más significativo y admonitorio que el hecho de que fuesen posibles? ¿Qué otra cosa podrían haber sido sino una parte de esa conciencia abarrotada? Como también lo fue que, mientras cambiaban los cubiertos y sacaban los nuevos platos, y a medida que iban transcurriendo las distintas fases del banquete; mientras se subrayaban las apariencias, se multiplicaban los fenómenos y le iban llegando las palabras de aquí y de allá como los rociones de una lenta y espesa marea; mientras la señora Lowder se iba volviendo más sólida y firme y Susie, a distancia y en comparación, más tenuemente improvisada y más diferente de todos y de todo; mientras, en suma, proseguía aquel proceso, nuestra joven señorita se posara, regresara y volviese a encajar su destino como si con uno o dos movimientos de las alas hubiese podido situarse brevemente ante una alternativa a él. Fuese lo que fuese, se había mostrado en ese breve intervalo mejor que la alternativa; y ahora se presentaba en la imagen y el lugar donde lo había dejado. La imagen era la de ser, como había afirmado lord Mark, un éxito. Lo cual dependía, claro, más o menos de lo que ella opinara, aunque por el momento prefirió no pararse a pensarlo. En cambio, volvió a insistir y le preguntó qué pensaba que haría con ella la señora Lowder, y él había respondido que podía dejarlo en manos de ésta.

—Recuperará su dinero —afirmó con mucha amabilidad. Curiosamente, lo dijo, sin dar a entender que le pareciese vulgar o «desagradable»; y enseguida se explicó añadiendo—: Aquí nadie hace nada por nada.

—Ah, si se refiere a que la compensaremos en cuanto podamos, nada puede ser más cierto. Pero es una idealista —continuó Milly—, y creo que, a la larga, a los idealistas no les importa perder.

Dentro de los límites de su entusiasmo, lord Mark encontró encantadora su respuesta.

—¿Le parece a usted que es una idealista?

—Nos ha idealizado completamente a mi amiga y a mí. Nos ve bajo una luz que no puede ser más favorecedora —respondió Milly—. Es mi única baza. Así que no me prive de ella.

—No se me ocurriría por nada del mundo. Pero ¿cree usted —prosiguió, como si de pronto fuese muy importante para él— que me ve a mí bajo una luz favorecedora?

Milly dejó la pregunta en el aire un momento, en parte porque la joven guapa seguía atrayendo su atención y en parte porque estaba sentada tan cerca de su anfitriona que no quería dar la impresión de que hablaba de ella con demasiada ligereza. La señora Lowder, no obstante, navegaba por otros derroteros y hacía escala en los diversos asuntos como en las islas de un archipiélago, por lo que siguió sin hacerles caso, y Kate Croy se iba volviendo cada vez más interesante. Milly, de hecho, recuperó de pronto la calma al comprender que la señora Lowder lo había dispuesto todo para que lord Mark la informara sobre sus cualidades y tal vez sobre su valor. La maravillosa señora había querido que el joven no tuviera excusa para no formarse una opinión de la señorita Theale. Estaba por ver por qué su juicio tenía tanta importancia; pero esa intuición fue la que determinó la respuesta de Milly.

—No. Le conoce. Sus motivos tendrá. Ya veo que aquí se conocen todos, dentro de lo posible. Saben a lo que están acostumbrados y es eso y sólo eso lo que hace que sean como son. Pero hay cosas que desconocen.

Para hacerle justicia, lord Mark asintió como si no le faltase razón.

—¿Que desconozco… con la de molestias que me he tomado y los tumbos que he dado por el mundo para saberlo todo?

Milly se detuvo a pensar y tal vez fuese la verdad misma de sus palabras —que no podía pasar por alto— lo que agudizó su impaciencia y por tanto su ingenio.

—Está usted harto, pero no es sabio. Está familiarizado con todo, pero en realidad no es consciente de nada. Le falta imaginación.

Al oírla, lord Mark echó atrás la cabeza y recorrió con la mirada el lado opuesto de la sala y por fin pareció divertirse lo bastante para atraer la atención de su anfitriona. No obstante, la señora Lowder se limitó a sonreír a Milly, como dándole a entender que ya contaba con que hiciesen bromas picantes, y prosiguió, con un chapoteo de la hélice, su crucero entre las islas.

—¡Ah, no es la primera vez que me lo dicen! —replicó el joven.

—A eso me refiero. A que ya lo ha oído todo. Por supuesto también a mí me ha oído a menudo, en mi país.

—No lo suficiente —se quejó él—. Le aseguro que espero seguir oyéndola mucho tiempo.

—Pero ¿de qué le ha servido? —continuó la joven como si estuviese francamente decidida a divertirle.

—¡Oh, lo sabrá cuando me conozca!

—Pero lo más probable es que no llegue a conocerle.

—Pues de eso me habrá servido —se rio.

Si habían dejado claro que no podían ni querían tratarse, ¿por qué Milly sintió cómo se intensificaba perversamente la relación para la que la habían elegido a su pesar? ¿Podía haber una consecuencia más extraña de su distanciamiento que el hecho de que estuviesen hablando en tono casi íntimo? Quería alejarse de él, o, más bien, alejarse de sí misma en tanto que estaba presente para él. Había comprendido ya —al fin y al cabo, ella también era una criatura maravillosa— que volvería a verle a menudo, y que el rasgo más notable de su amistad sería que ella se quedaría al margen. Podían hablar de cualquier cosa, pero no de ella; y, si respetaban ese acuerdo, tal vez pudieran llegar lejos. Es posible que empezasen justo entonces, cuando Milly aludió a aquella joven tan bella. Si iba a quedarse al margen, lo mejor sería fijarse en otra persona. Así que introdujo a Kate Croy en la conversación, dispuesta hasta cierto punto —pues no temía por ella lo más mínimo— a sacrificarla en caso necesario. El propio lord Mark se lo había puesto fácil al afirmar un poco antes que nadie hacía nada por nada.

—Y, si es tan interesada —sabía que hablaba con brusquedad—, ¿qué motivos tiene la señorita Croy? ¿Qué puede sacar de habernos recibido tan bien? ¡Mírela ahora! —Milly prorrumpió en una serie de halagos muy característicos que interrumpió con un «¡Oh!» compungido, cuando se dio la coincidencia de que Kate se volvió hacia ellos. Había querido insistir en la hermosura de su rostro, pero lo que hizo fue volver a darle la impresión a su dueña de que se había confabulado con lord Mark para observarla de manera interesada. Sin embargo, él respondió enseguida:

—¿Qué puede sacar? Pues conocerla.

—Y ¿qué ganaría con conocerme? Estoy segura de que sólo se preocupa por mí porque le doy lástima, y por eso resulta tan encantadora, porque está dispuesta a tomarse esa molestia. No se puede ser más

desinteresada.

Lord Mark podría haber respondido muchas cosas, pero al cabo de un minuto hizo su elección:

—Entonces me he perdido, pues mucho me temo que no me inspira usted ninguna lástima. ¿Cómo explica entonces «su éxito»? —preguntó.

—Es la razón principal. Nuestra amiga lo ha visto y por eso me compadece. Lo entiende, es mejor que ninguno de ustedes. Es muy hermosa —respondió Milly.

Él pareció sorprenderse por el argumento de la joven y, después de la distracción que se produjo cuando les ofrecieron un nuevo plato, respondió:

—Entiendo, quiere decir que su personalidad es hermosa, ¿no? Tiene que hablarme más de ella.

Milly se quedó desconcertada.

—Pero ¿no la conoce usted desde hace más tiempo que yo? ¿No lo ha comprobado por sí mismo?

—No… con ella he fracasado. Es inútil. No la entiendo. Y le aseguro que nada me gustaría más.

Esta afirmación convenció a su compañera de su sinceridad; tuvo la impresión de que estaba diciéndole lo que sentía y eso la sorprendió aún más pues era consciente de que ella misma no había despertado lo más mínimo su curiosidad. Al referirse a la compasión natural de su amiga había querido decir algo —casi para sus adentros—; sin duda había sido un detalle de gusto dudoso, pero lo había dicho con voz trémula a pesar de sí misma y él no se había molestado siquiera en preguntar: «¿Por qué cree que es “natural”?». No era que no fuera mucho mejor para ella no hacerlo: las explicaciones la habrían llevado demasiado lejos. Pero comprendió entonces que, en comparación, sus palabras sobre la otra joven a él le habían «interesado»; y probablemente eso implicara muchas cosas que terminaría averiguando y que espejeaban ya ante sus ojos como parte de esa «realidad» mayor que, dada su nueva situación, acabaría cautivándola. De hecho, algo de eso había en lo que lord Mark estaba diciendo en ese mismo instante:

—Así que, como ve, se equivoca al pensar que nos conocemos. A veces se fracasa. Por mi parte, desisto; o, mejor dicho: se la cedo. Hágalo por mí… Avíseme cuando sepa más. No dirá —añadió con mucha amabilidad— que no me fío de usted.

—Y ¿por qué no iba a fiarse? —preguntó Milly, dando pruebas, pensó, de una hermosa fatuidad, que a un hombre como él debía parecerle ingenua y sorprendente. Fue como si le diera a entender que podía mentir para lucirse, que su sinceridad pudiera no resistir el deseo de quedar bien con él. No obstante, no se quejó pues estaba ocupada con otras cosas. La única que había conseguido desconcertar a lord Mark había sido aquella joven tan hermosa, que pertenecía a su misma especie y a su sociedad; de sus certezas sobre una joven norteamericana, un producto exótico importado de valor escaso, y sobre su hábitat, las condiciones del clima, el crecimiento y el cultivo, así como de su inmensa profusión, de sus pocas variedades y de su limitado crecimiento, no dudaba lo más mínimo. Lo extraordinario fue que Milly le comprendió y tuvo la sensación de hablar con sinceridad al decir:

—Por supuesto, entiendo que debe ser difícil; igual que yo debo de ser fácil.

Y eso fue lo que quedó grabado en su memoria el resto de la velada, como si fuera lo más interesante que podía recordar. Se alegraba de ser fácil; incluso se habría resignado a pasar por un producto exótico de poco valor. De momento, en cualquier caso, eso favorecía su deseo de no acercarse mucho a lord Mark. Todos le habían dado la impresión de conocerse y, si el lugar que ocupaba la joven hermosa entre ellos era algo que se escapaba incluso a los iniciados, debía ser una verdadera incógnita.

II

Esa impresión de las incógnitas relacionadas o independientes fue, sin duda, la que dominó al principio a nuestras ligeramente anhelantes norteamericanas y encontró su expresión en sus frecuentes afirmaciones de que no le debían nada a nadie. Milly confesó más de una vez: «¡De haber sabido lo fácil que era…!», aunque casi siempre dejaba la frase sin terminar. No obstante, a la señora Stringham no le importaba gran cosa si con eso quería decir que habría ido antes a Londres, cosa que no habría podido hacer, o si, por el contrario —nada más típico de ella— se refería a que no habría ido nunca; en cualquier caso, su amiga había empezado a tener su propia opinión sobre por qué le parecía tan fácil. De momento, Susie se la guardó para sí, pues de habérsela comunicado habría podido ser un poco turbadora; además las incógnitas que hemos dicho que rodeaban a las dos damas eran en muchos casos incógnitas de cosas y de otras cuestiones de las que hablar. La lección que aprendieron fue que las había atrapado la fuerza incalculable de una ola que las había alzado y podía estrellarlas cuando quisiera. Ambas, nos apresuramos a añadir, sacaron el máximo provecho de su precaria situación, y, si Milly no hubiese contado con más ayuda, habría encontrado mucha al ver el estado en que se hallaba Susan Shepherd. La joven no le dijo nada, hasta pasados tres días, del «éxito» anunciado por lord Mark, que tuvieron ocasión de constatar por otros modos; estaba demasiado absorbida y conmovida, por la propia exaltación de Susie, que brillaba con la luz de su fe justificada, pues todo había sucedido tal como quería, a pesar de haber sido lo bastante inteligente para considerarlo muy poco probable: había apelado a la posible cortesía de Maud Manningham —una cortesía que era sólo remotamente posible— y había recibido una respuesta que honraba a la naturaleza humana. Esos primeros días, los sentimientos de la señora de Lancaster Gate fueron para nuestras amigas como una fina capa de polvo dorado en suspensión que difuminara armoniosamente el horizonte. Las formas y los colores que asomaban por detrás eran nítidos e intensos: ya hemos visto lo mucho que destacaban para Milly, pero, en comparación, no había nada tan digno y sincero como la fidelidad de Maud a un sentimiento. Eso enorgullecía a Susie mucho más que la importante posición de su amiga en el mundo —que por otro lado era consciente de no haber evaluado aún plenamente— y hasta más que su condición de inglesa clara y confiada, en un sentido más mundano que casi era una revelación, sin apenas resonancias interiores pero con bellas resonancias exteriores.

Una y otra vez, Susan Shepherd se repetía que Milly era «inmensa», aunque no concebía su alma como una sala llena de ecos, sino más bien como un receptáculo espacioso, al principio tal vez abierto, pero ahora repleto y cerrado herméticamente: para su admiradora norteamericana era una masa apretujada de detalles curiosos. Cuando, en su país, esta buena señora pensaba que sus amigos no eran precisamente pequeños —así los imaginaba casi siempre— quería decir con ello que eran grandes porque estaban vacíos. La señora Lowder, por una ley diferente, era grande porque estaba llena, porque tenía algo en común, incluso en reposo, con un proyectil de gran tamaño, cargado y listo para ser disparado. Eso, para la imaginación novelesca de Susie, constituía gran parte del encanto de haber reanudado su amistad, un encanto como el de sentarse, en primavera, un día tranquilo, en el talud cubierto de hierba y tachonado de margaritas de una enorme y soñolienta fortaleza. Fiel a sus instintos psicológicos, la señora Stringham había advertido sin duda que el «sentimiento» que percibía en su antigua compañera de estudios era cuestión de acción y movimiento y no, a pesar de los «querida» que pudiera intercalar, de otras florituras. Meditaba con interés sobre esa marca de la raza y percibía una diferente economía en su propio espíritu. Para ella, el mayor gozo consistía en saber por qué actuaba, la razón era la mitad del asunto; mientras que para la señora Lowder podía no haber razones: el «porqué» era un ingrediente superfluo, la vainilla o la nuez moscada, de las que podía prescindirse sin estropear el nutritivo budín. El deseo de la señora Lowder era, evidentemente, que sus dos jóvenes amigas también se llevasen bien; y, según le contó la señora Stringham a Milly en esos primeros días, cuando en Lancaster Gate no se dedicaba a hablar de ella, era porque estaba escuchando la

historia de la brillante sobrina de su anfitriona.

Sobre eso, las dos damas mayores tenían mucho que hablar, y la peregrina de Boston ni siquiera tenía claro que lo que había dispuesto en Londres no fuese una serie de acontecimientos emocionantes para ella. Tenía mala conciencia, de hecho se sentía casi inmoral, pues se veía obligada a reconocer que, como ella decía, se había dejado llevar. Se reía con Milly cuando ella también afirmaba que no sabía dónde acabaría aquello; y su inquietud se basaba en que la vida de la señora Lowder rebosaba de elementos a los que tenía que enfrentarse por primera vez en su vida. Representaban, según creía, el mundo que, por culpa del desprecio de los Padres Peregrinos, nunca había llegado a Boston —y que sin duda habría hundido bajo su peso el más sólido transatlántico—, y no podía fingir que se hallase ante semejante perspectiva sólo porque Milly hubiera tenido un capricho. Era ella quien lo había tenido, y precisamente respecto a su situación actual. Tan sólo podía consolarse repitiéndose que nunca había tenido ninguno o, lo que venía a ser lo mismo, que no se los había permitido. Además, enseguida descartó la alentadora sensación de que todo aquello pudiera convertirse en material literario. En cualquier caso, debía esperar y ya vería: le parecía enorme, oscuro y escabroso. En sus desvelos nocturnos pensaba que probablemente llegase a gustarle por lo que simbolizaba en sí mismo, es decir, por eso y por Milly. Lo raro era que fuese capaz de concebir sin temor que a Milly pudiera gustarle, o al menos que pudiera concebirlo sin temor en lo que se refiere a la tranquilidad y no sólo en lo que atañe a la conciencia. Era una suerte que, por el momento, sus dos espíritus se movieran al unísono.

Entretanto, la primera semana que siguió a la cena, bebió profundamente en las aguas de Lancaster Gate, y su compañera no pareció menos feliz, e, incluso románticamente dispuesta a dejarse agasajar. La hermosa joven inglesa de aquella casona inglesa era como una figura de un cuadro que hubiese escapado del lienzo como por arte de magia y la señora Stringham encontró el símil perfecto. No había descartado, más bien al contrario, aquella otra fantasía en virtud de la cual Milly era una princesa errante: ¿qué mayor armonía que ver a la doncella más virtuosa, la hija escogida de los burgueses, salir a las puertas de la ciudad a recibir a la princesa? Evidentemente, era una vez más la realidad, igual que el regocijo del encuentro con la princesa; pues las princesas viven en su mayoría una existencia plácida en el plano de la mera representación elegante. Por eso se abalanzaban, a las puertas de la ciudad, sobre las damiselas que esparcían flores; por eso, después de las efigies, los desfiles y otros juegos majestuosos, les agradaba la franca compañía de las personas. Kate Croy simbolizaba verdaderamente para Milly —que no le ahorró detalles a la señora Stringham— la personificación de la londinense maravillosa (tal como la había concebido hacía tiempo a partir de los relatos de los viajeros, las anécdotas neoyorquinas, viejas lecturas de *Punch*[13] y una amplia familiaridad con las novelas de la época). La única diferencia era que Kate era más simpática, pues la criatura en cuestión había sido más bien temible. La había imaginado, como mucho, igual de guapa que Kate, con los mismos movimientos de cabeza y el mismo tono de voz, la misma actitud y estatura, otras cosas añadidas y algunas quitadas, hasta tener todos los rasgos del producto de una sociedad cerrada que debiese ser al mismo tiempo la heroína de una historia formidable. Milly incluyó desde el principio a esa persona tan notable en una historia, la concibió, por una necesidad de la imaginación, como una heroína, intuyó que era el único papel en el que no estaría desaprovechada, a pesar de la agradable brusquedad de sus gestos, de su contención ante cualquier sentimentalismo, de sus sombrillas, sus chaquetas y sus zapatos, que no eran como los había imaginado Milly, del modo en que movía los brazos como un muchacho desenvuelto y de las ocasionales licencias de su manera de hablar.

Cuando Milly decidió que lo que la avergonzaba era la enorme buena voluntad de Kate, encontró de momento una clave suficiente y, a partir de entonces, las dos se sintieron muy a gusto. Fueron tal vez las horas más felices que pasarían juntas, enfrentándose por sí solas a la vastedad de Londres —el Londres de las tiendas, las calles y los barrios extrañamente interesantes para Milly, y el de los museos, los monumentos y las «vistas» con los que Kate estaba extrañamente poco familiarizada—, mientras sus mayores seguían un camino distinto, disfrutaban de su amistad y pensaban que la joven de la otra era una estupenda adquisición para la propia. Milly le confió más de una vez a Susan Shepherd que Kate tenía algún secreto, alguna dificultad que le ocultaba al margen del resto de su historia, y que, si había ayudado con tan buena disposición a la señora Lowder a recibirlas, había sido precisamente para procurarse una distracción y tener otra cosa en la que pensar. Aunque nuestra joven norteamericana todavía no tenía ninguna luz sobre el particular y tan sólo presentía que, cuando la tuviese, los colores se intensificarían, le gustaba creer que estaba preparada para cualquier cosa. Además, en su opinión, lo que sabía hasta el momento estaba saturado de carácter inglés, excéntrico y thackeriano, pues Kate Croy había sido cada vez más explícita a propósito de su situación, su pasado, su presente, sus apuros en general y su escasa fortuna a la hora de contentar a la vez a su padre, a su hermana, a su tía y a sí misma. La sutil intuición de Milly, que compartió

con su amiga Susie, fue que la joven tenía que contentar a alguien más, de quien todavía no le había hablado, estaba claro que en su caso así debía ser, pues, aunque no se trataba exactamente de una criatura hecha para inspirar pasiones, lo cual implica siempre cierta tontería, la mirada admirada de su amiga, apreciaba la clara sombra de algún interés masculino, sin duda eminente. Esa sombra tenue, desde dondequiera que se proyectase, había pendido toda la semana sobre la amiga de Milly, y el bello rostro de Kate Croy sonreía a través de ella, bajo la luz suave de las claraboyas, tanto en presencia de los viejos maestros pasivos en su gloria, como de los nuevos, o ultimísimos, que estaban repletos de alfileres y blandían afiladas tijeras.

Entretanto una faceta encantadora de la relación entre las dos jóvenes era que cada una juzgaba más interesante a la otra, que cada una creía ser, o al menos eso decía, un objeto polvoriento en comparación con su amiga, que les parecía una escogida por la naturaleza y la fortuna, dotada de la frescura de la mañana. A Kate le divertía y sorprendía que su amiga insistiera tanto en «secuestrarla», y Milly se preguntaba si Kate era sincera cuando afirmaba que le parecía la persona más extraordinaria —amén de la más encantadora— que había conocido. Habían hablado mucho en sus largos paseos en coche de caballos y no les habían faltado historias que contarse en las que la sobrina de la señora Lowder no era precisamente la que más destacaba. Las referencias de su visitante norteamericana a esas pasmosas inmensidades, a la adinerada y desconcertante Nueva York, a las grandes emociones y a las oportunidades de libertad sin límites, a su registro de padres y parientes consumidos, y de hermanos esbeltos, rubios, ambiciosos e inteligentes —que habían sido a quienes más había querido—, dedicados, en su función de tutores sucesivos, a extravagantes especulaciones y disipaciones que habían dejado, como último eslabón roto, a aquel ser exquisito del vestido negro, el rostro lívido y el cabello esplendoroso: una figura así, relegaba a la oscuridad la breve biografía, por mucho que se exagerase, de una simple desconocida de clase media de Bayswater. Y, aunque fuese una manera de decirlo muy de Bayswater, y aunque a Milly en ese momento le interesaran las costumbres de Bayswater, esa crítica prevaleció hasta tal punto que —al igual que la propia señora Stringham— casi consiguió convencer a su amiga de que era lo más parecido a una verdadera princesa que jamás llegaría a verse en Bayswater. De hecho, tan sincera le parecía que —a partir del tercer día— Milly empezó a adoptar en parte la opinión de la hermosa joven sobre su situación. Dicha impresión era sin duda un tributo al poder de Milly, un poder que para Kate no encerraba ningún misterio. Había momentos, bajo la luz de las claraboyas, en la larga sucesión de tiendas, en los que su actitud desenvuelta, pero un tanto seca, daba a entender de sobra que si ella hubiese tenido tanto dinero…

No era ni mucho menos que acusase a su amiga de no tener imaginación para gastar, sino de no tener la menor conciencia del temor, del ahorro, o de la costumbre de depender conscientemente de los demás. En esos momentos, cuando toda Wigmore Street[14] por ejemplo, parecía susurrar en torno a ellas y la pálida joven daba la impresión de mirar a los que susurraban, normalmente tan indistinguibles, como si fuesen ingleses concretos y particulares, partes de un todo y tal vez intrínsecamente notables, se acentuaba la percepción que tenía Kate de la inmensa dicha de la libertad de su amiga. El rango de acción de Milly era inmenso; no tenía que dar explicaciones a nadie; sus únicas normas eran su libertad, su fortuna y su capricho; un mundo obsequioso la rodeaba y cualquiera podía aspirar sus vapores a cada paso. En esos días, Kate estaba dispuesta a perdonarle tanta felicidad y también a creer que, si continuaba su amistad, seguiría siendo igual de generosa. En aquel momento no concebía que pudiera rajarse el laúd[15]; es decir, no sólo no imaginaba que nada pudiera interponerse entre ellas, sino tampoco que pudiese producirse ninguna distorsión en aquella claridad. Y, sin embargo, igual que Milly, en la cena de la señora Lowder, le había dicho a lord Mark que la joven del otro extremo de la mesa era amable con ella porque intuía vagamente que era lo más conveniente, dicha joven albergaba un sentimiento secreto, que no había analizado pero sí dividido en partes, que coincidía con esa impresión; la sensación latente de que Milly Theale no era, al fin y al cabo, una persona con la que se pudieran intercambiar los papeles o siquiera la suerte. Kate en realidad no sabía muy bien a qué se refería con eso, y apenas acertaba a formularlo diciéndose que, curiosamente, a pesar de lo rica que era Milly, no se la podía odiar. La guapa joven se debatía entre esas alegrías y esas crueldades: no se le ocultaba que, sin la ayuda de una razón muy particular, habría sido una prueba para su filosofía no dejarse irritar por la dueña de tantos millones, que, de niña, podría haber sido, como ella misma, sólo vaga y cruelmente femenina. No estaba ni mucho menos segura de que la tía Maud le gustase tanto como merecía, y la fortuna de la tía Maud era obviamente inferior a la de Milly. Había por tanto, a favor de esta última, cierta influencia que acabaría de perfilarse después; y entretanto, sin duda, bastaba con que fuese tan encantadora como extraña y tan extraña como encantadora, lo cual ya era de por sí una rara diversión; por no decir que, además, Milly había insistido en que aceptase varios objetos de valor. Una semana en su compañía en tales condiciones, que ella resumía como dispensar una ayuda y un consuelo

inmensos a una peregrina ciega y errante, se anunció desde muy pronto como una semana de regalos, reconocimientos, recuerdos, y muestras de gratitud y admiración de sólo una de las dos partes. Kate se planteó la conveniencia de evitar las tiendas hasta tener alguna garantía de que no iba a poner a sus pies todas sus mercancias cuando entrase en ellas como su humilde acompañante; pero lo cierto es que lo hizo después de encontrarse en posesión, a pesar de sus protestas, de varias joyas preciosas y otros objetos de menor importancia.

No menos absurdo fue que llegase un día, al final de la semana, en el que Milly le pidió, como única «retribución», que le hablase un poco de lord Mark y que le prometiera el privilegio de una visita a la señora Condrip. Tenía a su disposición muchas otras formas de entretenimiento, pero su interés era vergonzosamente humano, y parecía esperar más revelaciones de su visita a aquella angustiada señora de Chelsea que de las mejores noches en la ópera. Kate no le ocultó lo mucho que admiraba su falta de miedo: el miedo, en concreto, a aburrirse en semejante compañía parecía justificado. La respuesta de Milly fue una serie de preguntas cuyo extraño sentido dejó perpleja a su amiga. Algunas, sin duda, eran más comprensibles, y Kate no se sorprendió al oírle decir que no acababa de entender a lord Mark. No obstante, lo que ella, a su vez, le contó fue francamente insuficiente, pues explicarle las cosas por las que era más conocido en Lancaster Gate no resultaba nada fácil. Por lo general a la gente se la conoce por lo que tiene que ofrecer, algo que se puede tocar, nombrar o demostrar a su favor o en su contra; y no conocía ningún otro caso en el que se atribuyese un valor tan grande a alguien que hubiese demostrado tan poco. Dicho valor era su futuro, que en cierto sentido la tía Maud había aceptado como si se tratase del excelente cocinero o de la lancha a vapor de lord Mark.

Con eso Kate no quería decir que pensara que era un farsante; era posible que llegara a hacer grandes cosas, pero de momento ése era su único logro. Aunque, por otro lado, haber conseguido que la tía Maud se lo tomara tan en serio era ya todo un éxito, y no precisamente al alcance de cualquiera. Sin duda, lo mejor de él, en conjunto, era que la tía Maud tenía fe en él. A menudo era fantasiosa, pero reconocía a un farsante nada más verlo y… no, lord Mark no lo era. Había estado una temporada en el Parlamento, en el bando *tory*, pero había perdido su escaño a la primera ocasión y eso era de lo único de lo que podía jactarse. No obstante, no se jactaba de nada, lo cual muy probablemente fuese un síntoma de su inteligencia, uno de esos síntomas que los muy inteligentes comparten con los auténticos estúpidos. Incluso la tía Maud admitía con frecuencia que, en su opinión, tenía muchos números para ser relegado a los últimos puestos. Sin embargo, él no era indiferente —indiferente consigo mismo— pues se aprovechaba tanto de Lancaster Gate como Lancaster Gate de él, igual que podría decirse que se explotan mutuamente en Londres las partes de cualquier relación.

Kate le explicó a su atenta amiga que quienes tenían algo que ofrecer —aunque fuesen los menos— intentaban conseguir lo máximo posible a cambio y obtenían al menos su valor. Lo sorprendente era que a veces eso se lograba con un feliz entendimiento. El explotador en un sentido era el explotado en otro, había un equilibrio, y los engranajes del mecanismo, como se ve, estaban perfectamente engrasados. De ese modo la gente podía seguir apreciándose, como al parecer apreciaba la tía Maud a lord Mark, y como lord Mark, era de suponer, apreciaba a la señora Lowder, pues en caso contrario sería más grosero de lo que cabía imaginar. Kate todavía no había conseguido entender qué podía hacer lord Mark por su tía, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta que la buena señora lo necesitaba, en el mejor de los casos, mucho menos de lo que creía; aunque había muchas otras cosas por parte de ambos que Kate seguía sin entender. En general creía en cualquiera en quien tuviese confianza la tía Maud, y le dio a entender a Milly que no conocería a nadie más extraordinario que ella por muy maravillosa que fuese la gente a quien llegara a conocer en ese país. Había miles de personas más famosas y por supuesto gente mucho más engreída, pero, en su opinión, sería muy difícil encontrar a alguien tan grande en todos los sentidos. Cuando Milly le preguntó interesada si su confianza se debía a la que tenía en ella la señora Lowder, su interlocutora respondió que sí sin inmutarse y que era por esa misma razón por la que creía en sí misma. ¿En quién había depositado su confianza la tía Maud sino en su sobrina, y quién estaba más inmersa que ella en ese proceso de explotar y ser explotada?

—Te preguntarás —dijo Kate— qué puedo ofrecerle yo; y eso es justamente lo que estoy intentando averiguar. Debe haber alguna cosa que cree poder conseguir de mí. Puedes estar segura de que lo conseguirá, y así sabré de qué se trata; pero créeme si te digo que no podría averiguarlo de otro modo.

Declinó cuestionar la posible «rentabilidad» de Milly y las dos coincidieron en que daría beneficios del cien por cien hasta el último momento y los pagaría al contado.

Estas finas amabilidades, las bromas, las ironías, el lujo de los cotilleos y las especulaciones sobre Londres y la vida, se convirtieron enseguida en su manera de comunicarse, y Milly declaró estar encantada de saber que iban a utilizarla. Y tanto mejor si lo hacía la mujer más notable de Inglaterra. ¿Qué más

podían desear sino que las utilizara a ambas? Cuando se paraba a pensar en lo raro que era que quisiera utilizarlas a las dos, Kate respondía que era precisamente la prueba de su sinceridad. La señora Lowder siempre se dejaba arrastrar por sus sentimientos y eso era lo que había propiciado la llegada de su antigua amiga de colegio. Siempre era interesante ver de qué lado saltaba la liebre cuando algo la conmovía, y hacía mucho que no sucedía. De hecho, como ya sabemos, era justo lo que tenía maravillada a Milly Theale, que, al tratar a la señora Lowder, había visto muchos eslabones rotos en la cadena que la unía a Susie. Conocía tan bien su propia opinión sobre Susie que había pensado que la dueña de Lancaster Gate opinaría algo muy distinto, y que no fuese así la desconcertaba continuamente. Sin embargo, tal desconcierto fue la causa de otra impresión más sutil cuando se atrevió a comentarle a Kate que, en su opinión, Susan Shepherd —y sobre todo la Susan Shepherd surgida de forma tan inesperada de un pasado irrelevante— tendría que haber aburrido a la tía Maud, y su confidente coincidió con ella y añadió varios argumentos en el mismo sentido. Lo que estaba claro era que Susan Shepherd aburría al menos a la sobrina: la joven no veía nada en ella que justificara siquiera la indulgencia de Milly, a quien ese pequeño detalle le pareció muy significativo. Que la pobre Susie no significase nada para la guapa joven arrojó una luz sobre ella más reveladora de lo que parecía. También fue, en cierto sentido, una advertencia para la compañera de la pobre Susie, que pareció indicarle la dirección en que le convenía mirar. Le irritó que alguien lo bastante bueno para ella no lo fuese también para otra joven; aunque, curiosamente, habría podido perdonarle sin dificultad el desaire a la propia señora Lowder, porque a la señora Lowder no se le notaba mientras que a Kate Croy sí; sin embargo, al final, debemos añadir, entendió sus motivos y eso enriqueció su espíritu. ¿No era razón suficiente que la joven guapa fuese, entre sus otras muchas excelentes cualidades, un poco brutal, y no hubiera dado a entender ella misma, como nadie había hecho hasta entonces, que eso le daba una belleza impetuosa e incluso una extraña elegancia? Kate no era brutalmente brutal, como, en su ignorancia, Milly había supuesto hasta entonces que era el único modo de serlo; ni siquiera lo era de una manera agresiva, sino más bien indiferente, defensiva, y podría decirse que por la costumbre de no confiarse demasiado. Simplificaba de antemano, se adelantaba a sus dudas y sabía con una singular rapidez qué era lo que, como decían en Nueva York, no le iba a gustar. Al menos en ese aspecto la gente era mucho más rápida en Inglaterra que en su país; y Milly no tardó en comprender que tales instintos eran frecuentes en un mundo en el que abundaban los peligros. Estaba claro que había más peligros en torno a Lancaster Gate que los que podían sospecharse en Nueva York o soñarse en Boston. En todo caso, se tomaban más precauciones porque se presentía su presencia, y ciertamente era un mundo notable si en él había que precaverse de algún modo contra Susie.

III

Milly compensó enseguida a Susie por cualquier concesión que hubiese tenido que hacer en privado ante aquellas tibias opiniones, pues las largas conversaciones nocturnas entre ambas abarcaban no sólo cualquier cosa ocurrida o insinuada en las horas que pasaban separadas, sino otras muchas cuestiones. A las cuatro de la tarde, si la ocasión lo requería, Milly podía mostrarse distante, pero con nadie hablaba con tanta libertad como con Susan Shepherd a medianoche. Además, deberíamos añadir cuanto antes que todavía no le había dado a su amiga —al cabo de seis días— ninguna noticia comparable al anuncio que le hizo ésta después de dar un paseo con la señora Lowder por el interesante parque de Battersea, para variar. Las dos amigas mayores habían ido al parque mientras las dos jóvenes se entregaban a fantasías más osadas en el admirable carruaje que había alquilado Milly en el hotel, la carroza más lenta, engalanada y absurda que había visto jamás, y eso que era dueña de varias cuadras notoriamente mal gestionadas; y en el curso de aquel circuito, repetido varias veces, había salido a «relucir», como dijo la señora Stringham, que las dos habitantes de Lancaster Gate conocían al otro amigo inglés de Mildred, el caballero relacionado con un periódico (Susie esperó antes de pronunciar su nombre) a quien había visto en Nueva York justo antes de emprender sus actuales aventuras. Por supuesto, su nombre había salido a relucir durante el paseo por el parque de Battersea, pues de otro modo no podría haberlo identificado; y Susie, antes de contribuir a la conversación con una especie de confesión, tuvo que dejar claro que se refería al señor Merton Densher, porque al principio Milly no pareció entender a quién se refería y ejerció cierto dominio de sí misma antes de comentar que era un caso sorprendente, una posibilidad entre un millón. Por lo que pudo deducir, tanto Maud como la señorita Croy lo conocían bastante bien, aunque la señora Lowder no se refirió a él como si fuese un amigo íntimo. Susie subrayó que ella no lo había sacado a colación: de hecho no lo había hecho ninguna de las dos; la señora Lowder tan sólo había aludido a un joven periodista conocido suyo que había viajado hacía poco a su maravilloso país —siempre decía «su maravilloso país»— enviado por su periódico. Pero la señora Stringham había continuado la conversación, con mucha delicadeza y ésa era la confesión: había admitido, sin ánimo de molestar a nadie, que el señor Densher era un conocido de Milly, aunque se contuvo antes de ir más allá. Afirmar que la señora Lowder se había quedado atónita era quedarse corta; luego ella también se había dominado; y, por un instante, ambas parecieron ocultarse algo.

—Por suerte —prosiguió la informante de Milly—, recordé a tiempo que no tenía nada que esconder y eso lo hizo mucho más fácil. No sé qué me oculta Maud, pero algo hay. Le interesó mucho saber que le conocías y que el señor Densher hubiese ido a verte tan deprisa. Pero me aventuré a decirle que no habíais pasado tanto tiempo juntos como para haceros grandes amigos. No sé si hice bien.

Por poco que tardase en darle esas explicaciones, hubo tiempo suficiente —antes de que la mayor de las dos mujeres terminara de descargar su conciencia— para que Milly pudiese responder que, aunque la cosa tenía sin duda su importancia, no creía que fuese para tanto. Era raro, pero no milagroso, que el único inglés al que conocían encajara tan de repente: las dos habían visto a menudo lo extraordinariamente pequeño que, como suele decirse, era el mundo. Sin duda, además, Susie había actuado con franqueza al reconocer su nombre. ¿Qué necesidad había de andarse con misterios? Y ¡qué otra cosa habría parecido si el señor Densher hubiese regresado y hubieran descubierto que habían fingido no conocerlo!

—No sé, querida Susie —observó la joven—, qué crees que tengo que ocultar.

—Qué más da que sepas o ignores lo que yo creo —respondió la señora Stringham—, si siempre lo averiguas y te trae sin cuidado. Pero, dime, ¿te ha hablado de él la señorita Croy?

—¿Del señor Densher? Ni una palabra. Nunca hemos hablado de él. ¿Por qué habríamos de hacerlo?

—Que tú no hayas hablado me parece comprensible; pero que tu amiga nunca lo haya sacado a colación —opinó Susie— puede significar algo.

—¿Qué?

—Bueno —respondió enseguida la señora Stringham—, lo entenderás si te digo que Maud me ha pedido que te dé a entender que tal vez sería mejor no hablar más de él, de momento; sobre todo con su sobrina, a no ser, claro, que sea ella quien lo haga. Pero Maud opina que no lo hará.

Milly estaba dispuesta a comprometerse a cualquier cosa, pero los hechos, o lo que de ellos sabían, le parecieron un tanto enmarañados.

—¿Es que hay algo entre ellos?

—No… He creído entender que no, pero Maud es precavida. Teme alguna cosa. O tal vez sea más exacto decir que todo la asusta.

—¿Quieres decir que le da miedo que… se… quieran? —preguntó Milly.

Susie se quedó ensimismada y luego exclamó con efusividad:

—Mi querida niña, estamos en un laberinto.

—Pues claro. ¡Por eso es tan divertido! —respondió Milly con una extraña alegría, para añadir acto seguido—: No me digas que, en esto, por ejemplo, no hay abismos. Me gustan los abismos.

Su amiga la miró —como hacía a menudo— con más atención de la que parecía requerir la ocasión; y cualquiera que hubiese estado presente se habría preguntado con cuál de sus propios pensamientos estaba intentando encajar la conversación aquella buena señora. Sin duda tenía una excesiva tendencia a interpretar las palabras de su joven amiga como síntomas de una supuesta enfermedad. No obstante, su regla primordial era mostrarse frívola cuando la joven lo era. Tenía el don bostoniano de ser original, pero a la moda, igual que los relatos que publicaba en las revistas; y Maud Lowder, para quien eso era nuevo, y que nunca había oído hablar de nada siquiera remotamente parecido, la apreciaba, como recurso social, justo por eso. No iba a fallarle ahora, pues con él podía enfrentarse a casi cualquier cosa:

—Esperemos, pues, que podamos sondear sus profundidades… ¡estoy preparada para el peor de los pesares y el peor de los pecados! Pero ambas estamos de acuerdo en que querría que su sobrina se casara con lord Mark, ¿no? ¿Es que no te ha dicho nada?

—¿La señora Lowder?

—No. Kate. ¿No irás a creer que no lo sabe?

Milly se quedó callada un minuto. Había pasado varios días con Kate Croy en un estado de intimidad tan profunda como repentina, y habían llegado muy lejos en sus conversaciones en muchos sentidos. Sin embargo, entonces comprendió con un escalofrío que era posible que la cantidad de cosas que le había contado su nueva amiga fuese pequeña o muy pequeña comparada con lo que no le había contado. En cualquier caso no podía afirmar si Kate le había dicho o no que su tía planeaba casarla con lord Mark: sólo le había dado a entender, mediante insinuaciones, que su tía tenía planes para ella. Por mucho que quisiera descartarlo con un ademán nervioso, aquel brusco silencio sobre el señor Densher alteraba todas las proporciones y afectaba a todos los valores. Le pareció absurdo permitir que eso introdujera un cambio que ni siquiera habría sabido definir, pero al menos tuvo el orgullo de saber disimularlo. No obstante, la idea de que aquel caballero hubiera estado en el mismo sitio que ella había ocupado ingenuamente hasta entonces, se presentó casi violentamente ante sus ojos. Le habría bastado con otro momento a solas para ver abismos —ya que abismos era lo que quería— en la simple circunstancia del silencio que él había guardado en Nueva York a propósito de sus amigos ingleses. Apenas habían tenido tiempo de nada pero, de haber querido, Milly habría podido descubrir por sí misma que había evitado hablar de la señorita Croy y que era muy poco natural que lo hubiese hecho. Y a eso había que añadir que, incluso si su silencio había sido misterioso, lo cual era absurdo en vista de todas las demás cosas de las que no había podido hablarle, era precisamente lo que más convenía a Milly, pues coincidía con lo que le había contado a Susie. Todo lo cual llevó a las dos amigas a reconocer, en esa ocasión, de la manera más singular, que el hecho de que todas conocieran al señor Densher —todas menos Susie, que probablemente lo conocería pronto— estaba ligado, en un mundo de idas y venidas, a las leyes comunes del azar; y también que era divertido —¡sí, muy divertido!— suponer que podía «haber algo» en el hecho de que se hubiesen enterado tan de repente. Era como si existiese la posibilidad de que les hubieran preparado de algún modo el terreno —o el ambiente, si se prefiere—; aunque dicha posibilidad probablemente habría requerido de algún análisis posterior. Además, la verdad —y las dos amigas ya estaban hablando de la verdad— todavía no había salido a la luz, a juzgar por lo que le había pedido la señora Lowder a su vieja amiga.

De acuerdo con la recomendación de la señora Lowder, no debían decirle nada a Kate y la mejor esperanza de contar con una interesante complicación dependía de lo que la tía Maud pudiera estar ocultando; y cuando, después de la conversación que hemos reproducido, Milly volvió a ver a Kate sin citar ningún nombre, su silencio logró pasar desapercibido como el inicio de un nuevo tipo de diversión. Tanto más nuevo porque incluía cierto desasosiego; siempre que había querido divertirse lo había hecho con las

manos un poco más libres. Sin embargo, era emocionante tener una razón aún más sutil para interesarse por la joven guapa, como seguía incluso ahora considerando a Kate; y una razón —ahí estaba la clave— que la joven no podía sospechar en lo más mínimo. Así que Milly se sorprendió dos veces, las siguientes dos o tres horas, observándola detenidamente, sabiendo que en su rostro se habían posado con más o menos familiaridad los ojos del señor Densher y que, por el mismo motivo, ella debía haber contemplado aún con mayor dulzura el suyo. Se consoló pensando que inevitablemente habría contemplado, con tanta dulzura como cupiera imaginar, miles de rostros en los que no habría dejado ninguna huella, pero la singular consecuencia de esa idea fue que se intensificó para ella una faceta de su amiga que sin duda estaba más preparada que ésta para considerar «la otra», la más indescifrable. Era absurdo, y Milly lo sabía; pero era la otra faceta la que se le había presentado, de pronto, desde que la proximidad del señor Densher había quedado al descubierto. No tenía la excusa de conocerla por la propia Kate, pues de momento nada demostraba particularmente que la tuviera. Daba igual: era con este nuevo rostro ahora ya plenamente expuesto con el que Kate iba y venía, con el que la besaba al saludarla y al despedirse, con el que hablaba de todo como de costumbre excepto de lo que se había convertido de pronto para Milly en «eso». Es cierto que sin duda nuestra joven no habría notado con tanta claridad la diferencia en ese par de ocasiones si no hubiese reparado también en sus propias y posibles traiciones. Lo que pasaba era que, al despedirse, se preguntaba si en el fondo no tendría ella también «otra» faceta, absorbida como estaba por lo que no se decían; y lo más raro fue que, más tarde, cuando se preguntó por qué no lo había notado Kate, comprendió que se hallaba al borde de una gran oscuridad. Nunca sabría lo que de verdad sentía Kate sobre lo que pudiera inspirarle una persona como Milly Theale. Kate jamás permitiría que alguien como ella lo entendiera —y no por duplicidad, sino por una especie de falta de lenguaje común— ni lo pondría a su alcance.

Así fue como Milly vio a esa otra Kate los tres o cuatro días siguientes; y con quien se animó a hacer la prometida visita a Chelsea, el barrio del famoso Carlyle[16] el sitio donde merodeaban su espíritu y sus devotos, y el lugar de residencia de la «pobre Marian», a la que tantas veces había aludido y que, allí, era como un espíritu un tanto incongruente. En cuanto vio a la pobre Marian nuestra joven olvidó cualquier otro sentimiento y reparó tan sólo en que, al parecer, en Inglaterra, la posición social de dos hermanas podía ser muy distinta, y que podía ser imposible para las dos hacerse hueco en el mismo terreno: un estado de cosas que sabiamente vinculó a un orden jerárquico y aristocrático. La posición en que la señora Lowder había colocado a su sobrina en dicho orden no estaba del todo exenta de ambigüedad, aunque Milly creía estar convencida de que lord Mark podría haberla fijado, si hubiese querido, al mismo tiempo que la de la tía Maud; pero estaba claro que la señora Condrip se hallaba, podría decirse, en una geografía muy distinta. No se la habría encontrado en el mismo mapa social, y era como si sus visitantes hubiesen pasado una página tras otra antes del alivio final del benévolo «¡Aquí!». Por supuesto, franquearon aquella distancia, pero tuvieron que atravesar un puente, y la impresión que le dejó hizo que Milly se preguntase si un espíritu que no estuviese acostumbrado a eso repararía más en los puentes o en las distancias. Fue, como si en Norteamérica, por contraste, no existiera ni una cosa ni la otra: ni la diferencia de posición social, ni por parte de nadie, pero sobre todo de una de las interesadas, la perfecta cortesía y la renuncia consciente a la conciencia que hacían posible dicha diferencia. Esa renuncia consciente, en todo caso, igual que la perfecta cortesía, los puentes, la distancia y las hojas pasadas del atlas social, introdujeron, debemos confesarlo, a nuestra joven, a falta de un material más sólido, en la tenue leyenda literaria y el eco vagabundo de Trollope, de Thackeray y tal vez sobre todo de Dickens, que tanto habían influido en su peregrinaje. Luego, esa misma noche, pudo contarle a Susie que esa leyenda, antes de que pudiera librarse de ella, había estado muy presente, que el adorado autor de *Los Newcome*, en suma, había dominado en conjunto la escena; y que al cuadro le faltó, más de lo que ella había esperado, a no ser que hubiese mostrado menos de lo que se había temido, un cierto perfil picwickiano. Le explicó que la señora Condrip no había resultado ser otra señora Nickleby, ni siquiera —pues por el modo en que hablaba la pobre y angustiada Kate podía haber sido cualquier cosa— una señora Micawber[17] viuda y resentida.

En esa conversación a medianoche, la señora Stringham le dio a entender con un suspiro que, en cualquier caso, esta faceta de la vida inglesa era precisamente la que ella misma parecía «condenada» —como decían todos los que la rodeaban— a echar de menos: había empezado a tener, en opinión de su observadora amiga, esos momentos de reacción caprichosa (típicos de Susan Shepherd) contra la elevada esfera de las frías convenciones a la que la había arrastrado su abrumadora relación con Maud Manningham. Milly nunca perdía de vista el lado Susan Shepherd de su amiga, y siempre estaba dispuesta a enfrentarse a él de manera tierna e imprecisa, a darle pacientes golpecitos en la espalda y a asegurarle que encontrarían el modo de atender sus necesidades. Esa noche tenían además otra cuestión que tratar que

resultó ser, por parte de la joven, con respecto a su visita a Chelsea, la revelación de que la señora Condrip, aprovechando un rato en que Kate había subido a atender a uno de los niños, había sacado de pronto a relucir la cuestión del señor Densher y se había referido a él con impaciencia diciendo que estaba enamorado de su hermana.

—Quiso que lo supiera —dijo Milly—, si de verdad sentía aprecio por Kate, pues le parece espantoso y cree que yo podría hacer algo.

Susie dudó.

—¿Para impedirlo? Es fácil de decir. ¿Qué quiere que hagas?

Milly esbozó una leve sonrisa.

—Creo que lo que querría es que fuese a visitarla a menudo para tenerla al corriente.

—¿Es que cree que no tienes nada mejor que hacer?

La joven no pudo ser más clara.

—Sólo admirar y adorar a su hermana, a quien sin embargo ella no entiende lo más mínimo, y consagrar a eso mi tiempo y todo lo demás. —A su amiga le sorprendió la brusquedad casi inédita con que lo dijo; como si la señora Condrip hubiese sido indescriptiblemente desconcertante. La señora Stringham nunca había visto a su compañera tan exaltada como en esos últimos tiempos, aunque era como si algo en su interior le diera un vago aspecto dorado que disimulaba su irritación. Eso era lo mejor de Milly, su poesía característica, o al menos la que le atribuía Susan Shepherd—. Pero sobre todo insistió —continuó— en que no le contase a Kate lo que me había dicho. Se supone que no debo decirle que hemos hablado.

—Y ¿por qué —preguntó enseguida la señora Stringham— le parece tan horrible el señor Densher?

Tuvo la impresión de que Milly se demoraba un poco en responder, lo cual tal vez indicara que había hablado más con la señora Condrip de lo que se inclinaba a reconocer.

—No es él —después la joven adoptó un tono un tanto novelesco; con ella nunca se sabía cuándo haría su aparición esa faceta—. Sino más bien el estado de sus finanzas.

—¿Tan malo es?

—No tiene fortuna propia, ni perspectiva de labrársela. Carece de ingresos y, según la señora Condrip, de forma de conseguirlos. Dice que es tan pobre como la pobreza y asegura saber lo que es eso.

Una vez más, la señora Stringham se quedó pensando y enseguida preguntó:

—Pero ¿no se supone que es un joven brillante e inteligente?

Milly tardó otro instante no precisamente infructuoso en responder.

—No tengo ni la menor idea.

A lo que Susie se limitó a replicar por el momento: «¡Ah!», aunque al cabo de un minuto añadió con aire pensativo: «Entiendo»; y por fin dijo:

—Lo mismo opina la señora Lowder.

—¿Que no llegará a nada en la vida?

—No… al contrario: que es excepcionalmente inteligente.

—Ah, sí; lo sé… —Milly volvió a adoptar, a propósito de lo que le había dicho su amiga, el mismo tono que un momento antes—. Sin embargo, en lo que más insiste la señora Condrip es en que la propia tía Maud no quiere saber nada de él y en que opina, o al menos eso me dijo, que el señor Densher nunca será rico ni un hombre público. Si fuese un hombre público, me pareció entender que estaría dispuesta a ayudarle; y, si sólo fuese rico, haría de tripas corazón para aceptarlo. Pero, tal como es, se ha convertido en tabú.

—En suma —dijo la señora Stringham con aire confidencial—, que la hermana te lo ha contado todo. Aun así, a la señora Lowder le cae simpático —añadió.

—No es lo que me contó la señora Condrip.

—Pues así es, querida, y mucho.

—Pues ¡ya ves!

Tras lo cual, con un cambio brusco y dejándose llevar con un abandono súbito y ligeramente anhelante por un vago reflujo y una fatiga generalizada en las que su amiga había reparado más de una vez en los últimos tiempos, Milly se dio la vuelta. No obstante, esa noche la cosa no quedó ahí, aunque ninguna de las dos habría sabido decir quién fue la primera en volver a sacarlo a relucir. Lo primero que observó Milly, al menos por un instante, fue que todas las personas a las que habían conocido parecían obsesionadas por el dinero. Lo cual hizo reír a Susie, no sin ternura, como dándole a entender de manera inocente que a unas personas les resultaba más fácil que a otras sentir indiferencia por el dinero; no obstante, afirmó que, en justicia, no se podía deducir, por la crudeza y transparencia de su comportamiento, qué era lo que representaba para Maud Manningham. Ejercía su mundanidad con grandes y discretos silencios, aunque tal

vez fuese mejor decir que jalonaba su despreocupación con grandes impulsos ocasionales. En realidad, y para ser justos, lo cierto era que Susie estaba pensando en la diferencia, en tanto que escogidas de la fortuna, entre su antigua amiga y la nueva. La tía Maud se sentaba, en cierto sentido, sobre su dinero, se apoyaba en él y vivía rodeada de él, pese a su aire dominante y elevado, y pese a que actuase, de forma severa y brillante, como si no estuviese ahí. Milly, con respecto al suyo, no adoptaba actitud alguna, lo cual era posiblemente, desde cierto punto de vista, un defecto: en cualquier caso, estaba muy lejos de él, justo al margen, y podía decirse que para llegar a conocerla no tenías que atravesar sus propiedades. Por otro lado, era evidente que la señora Lowder reservaba su riqueza para propósitos, fantasías y ambiciones que se revelarían generosos y desinteresados el día que los pusiera en práctica. Impondría su voluntad, pero ésta consistiría sólo en que una persona o dos no perdieran un beneficio por no someterse, si podía someterlos. A Milly, por ser mucho más joven, no se le podían atribuir planes tan a largo plazo: no había nadie en quien estuviese tan interesada. Era demasiado pronto, pues ni siquiera se preocupaba por sí misma. Incluso la más rica de las mujeres, a su edad, carece de motivos, y los de Milly aún tenían mucho tiempo para materializarse. Entretanto, era hermosa, sencilla y sublime sin ellos, tanto si los echaba de menos y aspiraba a tenerlos como si no; e, incluso cuando los tuviera, las cosas seguirían igual. Sólo entonces podría adoptar una actitud como la de la tía Maud. Tales fueron las asociaciones que asomaron en el coloquio entre las dos damas, cuando la mayor preguntó a la más joven si esa tarde había admitido conocer al señor Densher.

—¡Oh, no…! No le dije que lo conocía. Recordé —explicó la joven— los deseos de la señora Lowder.

—Pero lo que ella nos pidió —observó su amiga al cabo de un momento— fue que no le dijésemos nada a Kate.

—Sí… pero la señora Condrip se lo habría contado enseguida.

—¿Por qué? ¿No dices que le desagrada hablar del señor Densher?

—¿A la señora Condrip? —Milly se quedó pensativa—. Lo que más le gustaría es que su hermana llegase a pensar mal de él; y, si pudiese contarle algo que la ayudara a lograrlo…

Pero la joven se interrumpió, como si lo que iba a decir fuese evidente para su amiga.

No obstante, el interés de su compañera estaba concentrado en lo que veía ella.

—¿Quieres decir que se lo contaría a Kate? —La señora Stringham, dedujo que a eso era a lo que se refería Milly, pero seguía habiendo una pregunta sin responder—. Y ¿por qué iba a perjudicarle que tú lo conozcas?

—¿Cómo quieres que lo sepa? No es tanto que lo conozca como que lo haya ocultado.

—¡Ah! —dijo la señora Stringham para consolarla—. Tú no has ocultado nada. ¿No ha sido más bien la propia señorita Croy quien lo ha hecho?

—Lo que ha callado no ha sido mi relación con él —respondió Milly con una sonrisa.

—¿Sólo ha callado la suya, dices? En ese caso la responsabilidad recae sobre ella.

—Sí, pero —respondió la joven tal vez sin demasiada coherencia— está en su derecho de hacer lo que quiera.

—Y ¡tú también, querida! —exclamó sonriendo Susan Shepherd.

Milly la miró casi como si fuese simple y venerable, pero también como si la quisiera precisamente por eso.

—Kate y yo todavía no nos hemos peleado.

—Sólo quería decir —explicó la señora Stringham— que no entiendo lo que ganaría la señora Condrip.

—¿Contárselo a Kate? —Milly pensó un instante—. Yo sólo quería decir que no entiendo lo que ganaría yo.

—Pero antes o después acabará sabiéndose que os conoce a las dos.

Milly asintió imperceptiblemente.

—¿Cuando vuelva, dices?

—Os encontrará aquí a las dos y no creo que le resulte fácil renunciar a una de las dos por la otra.

Eso situó por fin la cuestión en una base más alegre.

—Podría ponerme en contacto antes con él —sugirió la joven—, advertirle para que cuando nos veamos finja no conocerme. O, mejor aún, podría no estar aquí cuando él volviese.

—¿Es que quieres escapar de él?

Extrañamente fue una idea que Milly pareció aceptar en parte.

—¡No sé de qué quiero escapar!

Esto disipó en el acto —por la tristeza y la dulzura con que resonó en los oídos de su amiga— cualquier sombra de una necesidad de dar más explicaciones. Tenía la impresión constante de que su relación flotaba, como una isla del sur, en un mar inmenso y cálido que simbolizaba, ante cualquier oportunidad imaginable,

un margen, una esfera exterior de emociones generales; y el efecto de cualquier suceso en particular podía ser que el mar sumergiera la isla y el margen se desbordara sobre el texto. En ese momento la enorme ola lo barrió todo.

—Iré a cualquier parte del mundo que tú quieras.

Pero Milly consiguió salir a flote.

—Mi querida Susie, ¡qué nerviosa te he puesto!

—¡Oh, esto no es nada todavía!

—Desde luego… comparado con lo que nos espera.

—No eres —dijo la buena de Susie, que había entendido a qué se refería— ni tan fuerte ni tan sana como insisto en que seas.

—Tú insiste, insiste… cuanto más, mejor. Aunque si llego a ser tan fuerte y sana como quieres —prosiguió Milly—, lo seré lo bastante para despedirme de ti para siempre con mucha dulzura. Es lo que ocurre —prosiguió recreándose— cuando ni tus mejores *beaux moments*[18] son más alegres que un bonito cementerio. He vivido todos estos años como si estuviese muerta, así que sin duda moriré como si estuviese viva… que es justo lo que deseas. Ya lo ves —concluyó—, nunca sabrás dónde estoy en realidad. Excepto cuando me haya ido; y aun entonces sólo sabrás dónde no estoy.

—Moriría por ti —dijo Susan Shepherd al cabo de un momento.

—¡Muchísimas gracias! Entonces quédate aquí conmigo.

—Pero no podemos pasar el mes de agosto en Londres, ni quedarnos muchas semanas más.

—Pues volveremos.

Susie palideció.

—¿A Estados Unidos?

—No, al extranjero… a Suiza, a Italia, a donde sea. Quería decir que no te apartes de mi lado, vaya donde vaya, aunque ahora no sepamos dónde. No —insistió—, no sé dónde estoy, y tú tampoco lo sabrás, pero da igual… y creo —dijo tras un momento de interrupción— que tienes razón en lo de que acabará sabiéndose todo. —Su amiga se la habría tomado a broma de no haber sido por su gama de sutiles matices entre la alegría y la seriedad, que suavizó todos los contrastes. Su falta de gravedad se compensaba con su falta de júbilo; es decir, que, si en ocasiones no había sido tan formal como habría querido la gente, en otras no era tan desenfadada como le habría gustado a ella misma—. Tendré que cargar con las consecuencias. Pero lo malo no es que «acabe sabiéndose» —añadió—, sino que la señora Condrip se lo dirá a Kate para desprestigiarle.

Su amiga pareció sorprendida.

—¿A él? Pero ¿cómo?

—¡En fin, si dice quererla…!

—¿Sólo lo dice?

—Digo que, si confía en él mientras está en el extranjero, y él es capaz de olvidarla hasta el punto de coquetear con otras…

La rectificación llevó a Susie, casi con alegría, a una amable conclusión.

—¿Es que el muy hipócrita intentó coquetear contigo?

—No… pero la cuestión no es ésa. Sino lo que puedan hacer creer a Kate.

—¿Que, teniendo en cuenta que es evidente que, de un modo u otro, él ha continuado su relación contigo, por no hablar de tu indiscutible y extraño encanto, habría estado más que dispuesto a cortejarte si tú le hubieses dado alguna esperanza?

Milly no confirmó ni negó su afirmación y se limitó a responder, un momento después, más pensativa de la cuenta:

—No, no creo que quiera dar a entender que yo le diese esperanzas, pues eso sólo serviría para subrayar su fidelidad. Lo único que digo —añadió por fin con una clara impaciencia— es que, si la señora Condrip pudiera darle a entender a Kate que tiene motivos para estar celosa, eso contribuiría, ya que tanto le teme, a desprestigiarle.

Susan Shepherd vio en esa explicación muchos signos de un ansia de temas que habrían encajado incluso en una de sus heroínas de Nueva Inglaterra. Estaba considerando muchas cosas al mismo tiempo, pero justo eso era lo que hacían las heroínas de Nueva Inglaterra, y en ese momento también era interesante averiguar cuántas había decidido considerar su amiga. Además, ¿no se habían propuesto desafiar al abismo? Cada cual se divierte como puede.

—Y ¿no es probable —preguntó— que se percate de que darle a entender a Kate que él es (¿cuál es esa palabra un poco anticuada?) *volage*[19]…?

—¿Y bien? —No había terminado la frase, pero Milly también parecía incapaz de hacerlo.

—No sé, podría ocurrir, lo que sucede a menudo, al menos con todas nuestras leyes y disposiciones: que avivase los sentimientos de Kate en lugar de apagarlos.

La idea era brillante, pero la joven se limitó a mirarla con sus bellos ojos.

—¿De Kate? ¡Oh!, no se refería a eso. No creo —añadió, como si comprendiera que le había dado sin querer una impresión equivocada— que la señora Condrip piense que está enamorada.

La señora Stringham la miró a su vez.

—Entonces ¿qué es lo que teme?

—Sólo que el señor Densher siga insistiendo… y que pueda conseguir algún resultado definitivo.

—¡Ah! —dijo Susie, con cierto desconcierto intelectual—, pues ¡sí que es previsora!

Al oírla, no obstante, Milly hizo una de sus bromas vagas y repentinas.

—No… sólo lo somos nosotras.

—Bueno, pues ¡no nos interesemos más por ellos que ellos por nosotras!

—¡Desde luego! —coincidió la joven. No obstante, volvió a manifestar cierto interés; daba la impresión de que quería ser clara—: No me habló de los sentimientos de Kate.

—¿Insinúas que está segura de que su hermana no le quiere?

Una vez más, fue como si Milly pensara con calma lo que quería decir; pero luego respondió:

—Si le quisiera, la señora Condrip me lo habría dicho.

Susan Shepherd pareció plantearse por qué habían hablado así en tal caso.

—Pero ¿se lo preguntaste?

—¡Ah, no!

—¡Oh! —dijo Susan Shepherd.

Milly añadió, como si tal cosa, que no se lo habría preguntado por nada del mundo.

Libro V

I

Lord Mark la miró ese día en particular como si estuviera dispuesto a obligarla a confesar que había sido injusta con él y se creyese en su derecho de atribuirse cualquier mérito o ventaja que resultara, de uno u otro modo, de su propósito: así que, al fin y al cabo, había algo que le interesaba lo suficiente para hacer que, absurdamente, Milly se sintiese como si estuviera confesándolo, a pesar de que ninguno de los dos había hablado de justicia o injusticia. Se había presentado en el hotel, las había visto a Susan Shepherd y a ella, y había sido levemente «cortés» con Susan, que se había sentido muy halagada; había vuelto otro día y no las había encontrado y después les había hecho una tercera visita en la que les había dado a entender que, si no hubiese acabado ya todo, como se percibía en el aire exhausto de los últimos jadeos de la estación, no habrían tenido más que decir qué sitios les gustaría visitar para ir a visitarlos cuanto antes. La sensación —o más bien la modesta excusa— que tenían ellas era que no les apetecía ir a ninguna parte; creían estar a gusto allí donde se encontrasen o donde las hubieran llevado. Era lo que sentían y nada podía ser más natural; sus impresiones de esa tarde, por un feliz giro de la rueda, habían formado un ramillete espléndido, un regalo como una brazada de las flores más raras. Se hallaban en presencia de dicha ofrenda, las habían llevado ante ella; y, si hubiesen conservado la costumbre de mirarse desde lejos para recalcar su acuerdo, las dos habrían coincidido en silencio en que había sido la mano de lord Mark la que había hecho girar la rueda. Había dado el impulso que, tras un rápido análisis, había permitido que no se perdieran, como no dejó de repetir Susie, tanto para sus adentros como a los demás interesados, una vivencia tan hermosa e interesante; también había impedido que se lo perdiese la señora Lowder, aunque en apariencia hubiesen ido allí con ella, y aunque fuese con dicha dama con quien nuestra joven pasó hablando la casi media hora que disfrutó plácidamente de la escena.

La enorme mansión histórica tuvo para Milly, aún más que la terraza y el jardín, un tono como de oro viejo añejado por la calidad del aire arrebolado del verano, aunque acorde con un gusto exquisito, como si ocupase el centro de una majestuosa y casi extravagante composición de Watteau[20]. Su impresión era que le habían sucedido muchas cosas relacionadas con esa revelación: le habían presentado a gente encantadora, habían recorrido pasillos entre armaduras, cuadros, vitrinas, tapices, mesitas de té y un sinfín de recordatorios de que ese estilo grandioso era un indicio de felicidad legada. El estilo grandioso era el recipiente y todo lo demás, la agradable riqueza personal, los amables murmullos de bienvenida, la edad honorable de los ilustres anfitriones, tan distinguidos y tan sencillos al mismo tiempo, tan tímidos y tan cordiales, eran sólo distintos elementos de la infusión. Dichos elementos se mezclaban y sazonaban la bebida, cuya esencia la joven podría haber notado destilada en la taza de café con hielo que había aceptado distraída de alguien, mientras parecía elevarla una oleada mayor: la fresca respuesta de su juventud, la lozanía de la flor de la vida. Tal vez la sensación que tuvo de entender gracias a la tía Maud a qué se debía todo aquello contribuyese a producir justo en ese momento una especie de clímax, porque, para una pobre joven temblorosa como ella, debió ser un clímax enterarse de pronto de que el principal motivo era ella, pues a eso se reducía lo que le dijo. Por supuesto, en los grandes cuadros todo es grandioso, y sin duda una parte de esa vida brillante —una vida que, tal como la había imaginado, se vivía humanamente— era que todas las impresiones dentro de su área de influencia participasen de su brillantez; pero, incluso dejando eso de lado, que Milly aceptara tan fácilmente la afabilidad de su interlocutora pareció imprimir un sello oficial a la hora que pasó con ella.

—Debe usted quedarse con nosotros… tiene que quedarse; cualquier otra cosa es imposible y ridícula; sin duda usted aún no lo sabe, no tiene cómo, pero pronto lo sabrá: puede quedarse como prefiera.

Había sido el murmullo de consagración que siguió a los murmullos de bienvenida, e incluso si hubiese sido sólo parte de la propia ebriedad espiritual de la tía Maud —pues era evidente que la buena mujer era quien presidía espiritualmente la ocasión— a Milly le sirvió entonces y después para señalar el punto

culminante al que había llegado su imaginación.

Supuso el final del breve paréntesis iniciado apenas el día anterior en Lancaster Gate cuando lord Mark le informó de que era un «éxito»: la llave volvió a encajar en la cerradura y, como hemos visto, se produjeron, sin que se dieran grandes y claras revelaciones, muchos incidentes teniendo en cuenta el tiempo y el lugar. Aunque por separado ninguno fuese una revelación, fueron tres veces más numerosos, todos gratuitos y geniales, de lo que habría cabido esperar de tres semanas improvisadas. La señora Lowder había organizado para ellas una «reunión», aunque con elementos combinados con cierta tosquedad, tal como notó Milly ahora que disponía de un poco más de tranquilidad. De modo que, si, en ese preciso instante, tuvo motivos puramente personales para pensar que el paréntesis estaba a punto de cerrarse, también adivinó con idéntica profundidad las intenciones de su interlocutora. El paréntesis se cerraría con ese cuadro tan admirable, pero la tía Maud continuaría sin saber si ella se quedaría o no en él. Lo que estaba haciendo, Milly no pudo por menos que darse cuenta, era convencerse a sí misma de que la suya era una serenidad de lo más sublime mientras intentaba a la vez persuadir a Milly. La joven intuyó que el modo en que lo intentaba era muy considerado, aunque ella en el fondo no lo necesitara ni lo echara en falta. Fue en esos minutos concretos, marcados por sus dudas respecto a su propia prudencia mientras degustaba agradecida el café con hielo, cuando mejor comprendió la relación de lord Mark con su presencia allí, o al menos con el hecho de que se estuviese divirtiendo. No necesitó ni cinco minutos para comprender que dicha relación era encantadora. Tal vez fuese, sencillamente, que, cuando estás hechizado, todo, cualquier cosa, parece encantador; pero, para ser francos, no había imaginado que pudiera llegar a establecerse entre los dos nada tan sociable y sereno como el amistoso entendimiento que en cierto modo se percibía en el aire. Había mucha gente formando corrillos cerca de la carpa que habían erigido sobre el césped a modo de templo para servir el refrigerio y que tuvo el don de recordarle —para bien— a un *durbar*[21]; su café con hielo había sido una consecuencia de esa asociación de ideas, en la cual el animado grupo desperdigado por el jardín pareció encajar a la perfección. Algunos habrían podido ser parte del contingente de «príncipes nativos» —expresión no por familiar menos noblemente gregaria— y lord Mark también podría haber pasado por uno de ellos, si no hubiese optado por presentarse como un diligente amigo de la familia. La familia de Lancaster Gate, claro, en la que lord Mark incluía a las dos norteamericanas y sobre todo a Kate Croy, una joven a la que era muy fácil cuidar. Kate conocía a todo el mundo, todo el mundo la conocía a ella y era la más guapa de las presentes, según le dijo Milly, llevada por un leve rapto de locura y generosidad veraniegas, a la tía Maud.

Para su nueva amiga, Kate tenía la extraordinaria y cautivadora cualidad de parecer en un momento dado sólo una bella extranjera, de despojarse de sus vínculos y su identidad y de dejar que la imaginación hiciese con ellos lo que quisiera, hasta convertirla sólo en una persona atractiva, vislumbrada a lo lejos, y tanto más seductora cuanto más la mirabas, pero que ante todo despertaba curiosidad. Nada podría haberle prestado, en una relación, mayor frescura que esa virtud de despertar la curiosidad ajena como si fuese una desconocida. Ya hemos dado a entender que eso fue lo que ocurrió cuando Milly la vio, después de enterarse por la señora Stringham de que conocía a Merton Densher; en ese momento le había parecido otra persona y, como habría dicho un espíritu crítico, más impersonal, y nuestra joven amiga había comprendido en el acto que no sería la última vez. Era justo lo que estaba ocurriendo esa tarde; Milly, que se distraía imaginando cosas, como una niña que juega en secreto con muñecas cuando ya es «demasiado mayor», se dedicó a imaginar qué pensaría de ella y dónde la emplazaría si no la conociese. Se convirtió así en una figura condicionada sólo por su apariencia, una figura a la que esperaban, nombraban y catalogaban. Era sin duda sólo una manera de intuir que su esencia consistía en estar peculiarmente a la altura de las circunstancias cuando, cualquiera que fuese la ocasión, las exigencias eran muy elevadas. Probablemente hubiese muchas más maneras de definirla: otra sería, por ejemplo, decir que estaba hecha para las grandes ocasiones sociales. Milly no estaba del todo segura de a qué se refería con eso, aunque ejercer su encanto en un marco como aquél tal vez fuese un buen ejemplo, pero se refugió en la idea de que, en cualquier caso, existían para su amiga. Limitarse a afirmar, para expresar su propia satisfacción, que era siempre «perfecta» implicaba cierta gazmoñería, pues eso mismo eran, con frecuencia, los *insupportables*[22]; sin embargo, fue lo que tuvo que contentarse con decir en su conversación con la tía Maud, además del torpe añadido de que era preciosa. No obstante, sirvió para reforzar el lazo que de momento unía a las dos damas y destiló, en suma, una gota de color de rosa sobre el punto de vista de la señora Lowder. El mismo, en realidad, que se propuso adoptar Milly el resto del día, aunque eso no impidió el continuo juego de esas otras luces indirectas, extrañas distracciones del espíritu, que ya hemos vislumbrado.

Por su parte, la señora Lowder se contentó con decir que sin duda Kate era un lujo para el mundo y no expresó mayor sorpresa por su perfección. ¿No estaba suficientemente claro a estas alturas que la habían

valorado y admirado precisamente por ser un lujo? No obstante, pudieron contener la cruda exaltación sin que por eso fuese menos evidente la circunstancia de que estaban flotando en el aire azulado. Volvieron a ver a lord Mark, que parecía estar pasando una y otra vez, demorándose convenientemente, ante sus ojos; era él quien ponía esa nota azulada, como una madeja de seda colgada al alcance de la mano del tejedor. La rápida lanzadera de la tía Maud lo iba devanando a intervalos rítmicos; y una de las verdades accesorias que pudo atisbar Milly fue que era plenamente consciente de que lo estaban utilizando. Lo cual parecía implicar una especie de complicidad a expensas de la señora Lowder de la que Milly no deseaba ser partícipe; por nada del mundo habría querido que insinuase que no las había llevado a Matcham —o lo que quiera que hubiese hecho— sólo por los *beaux yeux*[23] de la tía Maud. Se adivinaba que era algo que hacía tiempo que se esperaba en vano de él, y que ahora se estaban aprovechando de un cambio relativamente súbito y del fin de esa esperanza aplazada. Era obvio que la razón de dicho cambio no era asunto de Milly y por suerte no corría el riesgo de que lord Mark le dijese que ella había contribuido a inclinar la balanza. ¿Por qué entonces su participación discreta e imperceptible causaba el mismo efecto que si le dijese: «Sí, deje que la buena señora se exprese como le plazca»?, para luego añadir: «Ya que ha venido, que se quede y se divierta como pueda. Pero usted y yo somos diferentes». Milly sabía que ella lo era, y la diferencia de lord Mark era cosa suya; pero también sabía que, después de todo, incluso los consejos más claros de lord Mark sobre el asunto serían siempre tácitos. En la práctica —una vez más, todo se reducía a eso— no la obligaba a nada. Por otro lado, era loable que dejase que la señora Lowder se expresara como quisiera. Podía haberlo hecho de veinte maneras distintas y no habría cambiado nada.

—Debe quedarse con nosotros; ya sabe que puede hacerlo como mejor le parezca, de cualquier modo, de cualquiera, mi querida niña —dijo la señora Lowder con mucho énfasis—. Debe instalar aquí su hogar, y tiene la oportunidad de crear el más bello del mundo. No se llame a engaño y deje que pensemos un poco por usted, que la mimemos y cuidemos. Por encima de todo tiene que ayudarme con Kate, y debe quedarse un poco por ella; hacía mucho que no me sucedía nada tan bueno como que se hayan hecho amigas. Es hermoso, estupendo; significa todo para mí. Y lo mejor es que haya sido posible gracias a nuestra querida y adorable Susie, que me ha sido devuelta, después de tantos años, como por un milagro. Eso me conmueve aún más que su amistad con Kate. Dios ha sido bueno conmigo, desde luego, porque, a mi edad, ya no hace una nuevas amistades, y me refiero a las de verdad, las de una pieza. Es como cambiar de banquero pasados los cincuenta: no se hace. Por eso me han conservado a Susie, como al parecer acostumbran en su maravilloso país, envuelta en lavanda y papel rosado, y ha vuelto por fin como sacada de un cuento de hadas y con usted como hada ayudante.

Milly respondió agradecida que esa descripción hacía que se sintiera como si su vestido fuese de papel rosado con adornos de lavanda; pero la broma no impidió continuar a la tía Maud. Por otro lado, su joven protegida notaba que hablaba con total sinceridad. En cierto sentido era en ese momento una mujer muy feliz y una parte de su felicidad tal vez consistiera precisamente en que sus afectos y sus opiniones se movían de manera más armoniosa que nunca. Sin duda, quería a Susie, pero también a Kate y a lord Mark, a sus simpáticos anfitriones y a todos los que tenía cerca, incluso al viejo criado que se acercó para llevarse la taza vacía de Milly, y a la propia Milly que, a lo largo de la conversación, se sintió rodeada de un manto protector tan grueso como una alfombra oriental. Ella prefería estar encima que debajo de una alfombra oriental; pero aun así comprendió que, si no podía respirar, no sería por culpa de la señora Lowder. Una de las cosas que recordaría después era que la tía Maud siguió insistiendo en que Kate y ella debían seguir unidas, porque juntas podrían hacer cualquier cosa. Por supuesto, pensaba sobre todo en Kate, pero su plan, ampliado y mejorado, requería el bienestar de Milly para tener éxito, igual que el suyo requería el de Kate. Todavía era nebuloso, y un tanto confuso, pero también simpático y exhaustivo, y sirvió para que nuestra joven comprendiera lo que Kate había dicho de las posibilidades de su tía, y algunas cosas que había apuntado Susan Shepherd. Una de las más frecuentes en labios de esta última había sido siempre que la tía Maud era una fuerza de la naturaleza.

II

Debemos añadir que la razón principal por la que tan variadas impresiones no se materializaron del todo para la joven hasta más tarde fue que, de momento, se vieron reemplazadas por el único cuarto de hora que pasó con lord Mark.

—¿Ha visto en la casa ese precioso cuadro que tanto se le parece? —le preguntó plantándose ante ella, como dándole a entender que, aunque hubiese movido algunos hilos a los que prefería no hacer alusión, ésa no era razón para no divertirse.

—He deambulado por los salones y he visto cuadros. Pero ¡si de verdad fuese tan hermosa como me han parecido la mayoría…!

Milly necesitaba, en suma, una prueba y él estaba deseando proporcionársela. Era la viva imagen de un maravilloso Bronzino[24] que debía ver a toda costa. Así se la llevó, sin muchas dificultades, pues la mansión la había atrapado ya en su círculo místico. No obstante, no siguieron el camino más directo, sino que su lento avance se vio interrumpido por innumerables pausas naturales y amables conmociones, causadas en su mayor parte por la aparición de damas y caballeros, solos, en parejas, o en grupos, que les obligaban a detenerse con un invariable: «Oye, Mark». Ella no llegó a entender bien lo que le decían, pero le llamó mucho la atención que todos se conocieran tan bien; por lo demás, su impresión fue que los demás invitados flotaban aún más que ellos, como figurantes, la mayoría un poco estropeados para ser airosos caballeros o damas distinguidas. Daban la sensación de moverse por la inercia de un impulso ya muy lejano, pese a que seguían teniendo buena planta y aún parecían garantizados para una buena temporada, y le pareció, sobre todo al tratarlos en grupo, que tenían voces más agradables que si fuesen actores, que pronunciaban palabras huecas y amistosas y que se tomaban libertades hasta cierto punto disculpables con la mirada. Sus ojos se demoraban en ella más de la cuenta acompañados, con franca sencillez, por aquel inane «Oye, Mark», y era evidente que él parecía sugerirle que, si no tenía objeción, dejara disfrutar a aquella pobre gente.

Lo raro fue que, gracias a sus discretos modales —sin duda era admirable su modo nada enfático de expresarse—, consiguió convencerla medio en broma de que de verdad estaban disfrutando de su amable disposición. A Milly no le fue difícil advertir que la velada era una especie de feria frívola y agradable, una variopinta multitud de londinenses, que se conocían y que, a su manera, admitían su curiosidad. Habían sabido que ella estaría ahí, había despertado sus dudas y lo más fácil era fustigarlo a él con sus preguntas y, en general, creer lo que les dijera. ¿Acaso no percibía Milly de una manera pasiva que no le deseaban ningún mal, hasta el punto de que le era indiferente que se los presentara o no? Lo más extraño era tal vez la altiva seguridad y la indiferencia con que podía responder a las miradas insulsas que en aquel caso parecían la cota más elevada de civilización. Se sentía tan poco responsable de lo que pudieran decir de ella, que aceptarlo sin cuestionárselo podía ser un modo como cualquier otro de disfrutar de la vida. Era inevitable encajar en la más que probable caracterización de la joven norteamericana riquísima, rara, pero a la que en todo caso valía la pena conocer; y en realidad sólo especuló un instante sobre las fábulas y fantasías que debían haber circulado. Sólo una vez se planteó la inconcebible posibilidad de que Susie hubiese podido haber sido indiscreta, pero la descartó en el acto. Sabía con total claridad por qué había elegido a Susan Shepherd: porque, desde el primer momento, tuvo la convicción de que era la última persona del mundo capaz de portarse así. De manera que no era culpa de ellas y podía suceder cualquier cosa, todo podía volver a mezclarse, y las miradas amables siempre eran de agradecer: ¡ojalá fuese eso lo peor! Entró en la casa con su acompañante y esquivaron con benevolencia todos los obstáculos. Al parecer el Bronzino se hallaba en las profundidades de la mansión y la luz oblicua de la tarde se demoró para ellos en manchas de color antiguo y los emboscó a su paso en los rincones y las vistas lejanas.

Milly intuyó que lord Mark la había llevado allí por otro motivo además del que había confesado; era

como si quisiera decirle algo y esperase la ocasión de hacerlo con mucha finura y sin asomo de torpeza. Al mismo tiempo, cuando llegaron delante del cuadro, fue como si se lo hubiese dicho, pues todo se reducía a: «Déjese cuidar un poco por alguien que no tiene un pelo de tonto». Lo consiguió, en cierto sentido, con la complicidad del Bronzino; antes no le había importado que fuese tonto o no; pero en ese momento se alegró de que no lo fuera; y tanto más porque le recordó lo que le había dicho la señora Lowder. También ella quería cuidarla, ¿no era, *à peau près*[25] lo que pretendía toda aquella gente que la miraba con tanta amabilidad? Una vez más, las cosas se mezclaron: la belleza, la historia, la desenvoltura y la espléndida luz de mediados del verano. Fue una especie de majestuoso apogeo, el rosado alborear de una apoteosis curiosamente prematura. Lo que sucedió en realidad, tal como comprendió después, fue que lord Mark no dijo nada en particular y fue ella quien habló. No pudo evitarlo, pues se le saltaron las lágrimas nada más ver el misterioso retrato. Tal vez fuesen las lágrimas las que lo hicieron tan bello, extraño y maravilloso como le había dicho: el rostro de una joven dibujada de manera espléndida hasta el último detalle de las manos y vestida de forma no menos espléndida; un rostro de tez casi lívida, pero hermoso en su tristeza, y coronado por una mata de pelo recogido que, antes de que el tiempo lo desvaneciera, debió de tener un aire de familia con el suyo. La dama en cuestión, con sus rasgos marcados al estilo de Miguel Ángel, sus ojos de otro tiempo, sus labios carnosos, su cuello largo, las joyas renombradas y los brocados rojizos y descoloridos era un importante personaje, aunque sin rastro de alegría. Y estaba muerta, muerta, muerta. Milly la saludó con unas palabras que no tenían nada que ver con ella:

—Nunca estaré mejor.

Él la sonrió mirando el cuadro.

—¿Mejor que ella? Ni falta que hace, así está ya muy bien. Sin embargo, se nota que usted es mejor, porque ella, aunque sea espléndida, no está claro que fuese buena.

No la había entendido. Milly estaba delante del retrato, pero se había vuelto hacia él, y no le importó que reparase en sus lágrimas. Era probablemente el mejor momento que pasaría jamás con él. Tal vez fuese el mejor momento que pasaría nunca con nadie, ni con nada.

—Lo que quería decir es que esta tarde todo ha sido tan hermoso… Es posible que no vuelva a ver nada tan perfecto. Me alegra que usted haya sido parte de todo esto.

Aunque siguió sin entenderla, lord Mark se mostró tan amable como si lo hubiera hecho; no insistió más y ése fue su modo de cuidarla. Se limitó a protegerla de sí misma con una enorme experiencia.

—¡Tenemos que hablar de estas cosas!

¡Ah!, Milly sabía que ya lo habían hecho, y mucho más de lo que lo harían; movió la cabeza muy despacio hacia su pálida imagen.

—¡Ojalá pudiera apreciar el parecido! Tiene la tez verdosa —se rio—, aunque la mía lo es mucho más.

—Hasta las manos se parecen —observó lord Mark.

—Tiene las manos grandes —prosiguió Milly—, pero las mías son aún más grandes. Enormes.

—¡Oh!, la supera usted en todo… tal como acabo de decir. Pero se parecen. Tiene que darse cuenta —añadió, como si fuese importante para su reputación de hombre serio no dar la impresión de habérselo inventado.

—No sé… Una misma no puede saberlo. Es raro y no imagino cómo se le ha ocurrido…

—Claro que sí —la interrumpió.

Milly estaba delante del cuadro, de espaldas a una de las puertas de la sala que estaba abierta, y, al darse la vuelta, vio que se hallaban en presencia de otras tres personas que parecían también muy interesadas. Kate Croy era una de ellas; lord Mark acababa de verla, y Kate se detuvo al ver que no era la primera en llegar. Había llevado a una señora y a un caballero para mostrarles lo que lord Mark le estaba enseñando a Milly, y él se dispuso a pedirle ayuda. No obstante, Kate empezó a hablar antes de que tuviese tiempo de sugerírselo.

—¿Usted también lo ha notado? —le dedicó una sonrisa sin mirar a Milly—. Entonces no soy tan original como me gustaría. Pero el parecido es muy grande. —Sólo entonces se volvió hacia Milly, a quien, una vez más, todos miraron con ojos benévolos y amables—. Sí, querida, si quieres mi opinión, eres tú. Y estás soberbia. —Echó una breve mirada al cuadro, aunque lo bastante larga para que la pregunta que planteó a continuación a sus amigos no pareciese demasiado directa—. ¿No están de acuerdo?

—He traído a la señorita Theale —le explicó lord Mark a esta última— por iniciativa propia.

—Quería que *lady* Aldershaw —siguió contándole Kate a Milly— lo viese por sí misma.

—*Les grand esprits se rencontrent!*[26] —se rio su acompañante, un hombre alto, un poco encorvado y tembloroso, que, gracias a sus dientes prominentes, era la viva imagen de la urbanidad y a quien Milly tomó vagamente por una especie de gran hombre.

Lady Aldershaw, entretanto, miró a Milly como si fuese el Bronzino y el Bronzino simplemente Milly.

—Soberbia, soberbia. Por supuesto, me había fijado en usted. Es maravilloso —prosiguió, dándole la espalda al cuadro con una vehemencia que Milly intuyó que dirigía y controlaba sus movimientos.

No hizo falta más: se hicieron las presentaciones y enseguida le dijo:

—No sé si nos haría usted el placer de venir a…

Le faltaba lozanía, porque ya no era joven, aunque toda su persona se resistía a aceptarlo, pero era vivaz, llevaba un vestido de colores rosa y azul palidísimos y demasiadas joyas para la luz de mediados del verano. A Milly no le apetecía ir a ningún sitio y lord Mark tuvo que salir al rescate. Interrumpió a la buena señora y la dejó con la palabra en la boca sin pararse a pensar si eso podía ofenderla. Sin duda era el modo de tratarla, al menos él, porque la dama calló, sonrió y se alejó. Se había librado de ella como no lo habría hecho ni un enemigo. El caballero se quedó, un poco perdido, esforzándose en hacer gala de sus buenos modales como si se intentara silbar más fuerte; había procurado ser simpático mientras la señora hablaba y gracias a eso Milly pudo identificarlos. Eran lord y *lady* Aldershaw, y la inteligente era la mujer. Un minuto después o dos, la situación había cambiado y luego comprendió que había sido gracias a una sutil maniobra de Kate. La joven se excusó diciendo que, lamentablemente, tenía que ir a buscar a Susie, pero a la vez que hablaba se sentó en el sillón más cercano. Ante ella se extendía, a través de las puertas abiertas, la perspectiva de los demás salones, y vio a lord Mark acompañado de *lady* Aldershaw, que, vista desde atrás, tan cerca de él y tan absorta, parecía toda una entendida. Por su parte, lord Aldershaw se había quedado en medio de la sala, mientras Kate, de espaldas a él, se plantaba con mucha dulzura delante de Milly. Dicha dulzura era toda para ella y tuvo la sensación de que Kate había tratado al pobre caballero igual que lord Mark a su mujer. El hombre se quedó allí, arrastró un poco los pies, reparó de pronto en el Bronzino y lo contempló a través del monóculo. Soltó un vago sonido, no muy distinto de un gruñido y un: «¡Hum… muy notable!», que llevaron al rostro de Kate una sonrisa divertida. Un instante después se alejó renqueando por los suelos pulimentados y Milly se sintió como si hubiese sido grosera. Pero lord Aldershaw no era más que un simple detalle y Kate estaba diciéndole que esperaba que no se encontrase mal.

Así fue como, allá arriba, en el enorme y dorado salón histórico, en presencia del pálido personaje del cuadro, cuyos ojos parecían pendientes de los suyos, creyó sumirse de pronto en algo tan íntimo y humilde que le pareció extraño sentirlo en presencia de tanta grandeza. Surgió de forma inesperada y no tuvo más remedio que aceptarlo, y al mismo tiempo fue evidente que, en cierta medida, se había ensimismado así para escapar de otra cosa. Nada más reparar, tres minutos antes, en la aparición de su amiga fue consciente, incluso mientras los demás intentaban ocupar su atención, de la presencia perversa de algo con lo que cada vez le resultaba más desagradable toparse, al menos durante los primeros instantes y que obedecía a sus propios mecanismos. «¿Será así como lo mira a él?», se preguntó, la perversidad consistía en que era incapaz de olvidar que Densher conocía a Kate. No era culpa de Kate, ni, desde luego, de él; y, como era buena y generosa, le horrorizaba comportarse con ellos como si fuese culpa de alguno. Con el propio Densher no podía disculparse, pues estaba demasiado lejos; pero su impulso secundario fue disculparse con Kate. Y eso es lo que hizo con una extraña y blanda energía en cuanto notó que dicho impulso se ponía en funcionamiento.

—¿Me harías mañana un gran favor?

—Haré lo que quieras, querida.

—Pero es un secreto… Nadie debe enterarse. Tengo que ser falsa y malvada.

—Pues soy la persona indicada. —Kate sonrió—. No hay nada que me apetezca más. Hagamos algo malvado. No se puede vivir sin pecado.

Al oírla, los ojos de Milly se fijaron en los de su amiga.

—¡Ah! Es posible que no esté a la altura de lo que has pensado. Se trata sólo de engañar a Susan Shepherd.

—¡Ah! —respondió Kate, como si de verdad le pareciese muy poca cosa.

—Pero engañarla de verdad… en la medida en que sea posible.

—Y ¿mis habilidades pueden contribuir a engañarla? Bueno, por ti haré todo lo que esté en mi mano.

De modo que las dos acordaron que Milly contaría con su ayuda y con el consuelo de su presencia para ir a visitar a *sir* Luke Strett. Kate necesitó un minuto de aclaraciones, y para su amiga fue un alivio que aquel nombre no le dijera nada. Para ella hacía días que significaba mucho. El personaje en cuestión era, le explicó, la mayor luminaria de la ciencia médica, si es que, tal como creía, había conseguido dar (y había recurrido a la sabiduría de la serpiente[27]) con el hombre indicado. Le había escrito tres días antes y él la había citado a las once y veinte; pero la víspera había comprendido de pronto que no podía ir sola. Por un lado, su doncella no era lo bastante buena, y por el otro Susie lo era demasiado. Kate la escuchó con suma

indulgencia.

—Y ¡yo estoy justo en medio! ¿Demasiado buena para qué?

Milly reflexionó.

—Pues para preocuparla si no es nada. Y para preocuparla aún más, y antes de lo necesario, si no lo es.

Kate la miró con sus ojos insondables.

—Pero ¿se puede saber qué es lo que te pasa?

Lo dijo inevitablemente con un deje de impaciencia, como desafiándola a responder; de manera que, por un instante, Milly se sintió como si una persona mucho mayor dudase de sus dolencias imaginarias y sospechara de sus quejas de joven ignorante. También se contuvo pues eso era justo lo que quería saber; y respondió enseguida para tranquilizarla que, si todo resultaban ser imaginaciones suyas, ella sería testigo de su vergüenza. Kate respondió afirmando esperanzada que, si podía salir y ser tan encantadora, y deslumbrar e interesar a todo el mundo, no debía estar muy angustiada ni creerse verdaderamente amenazada.

—Bueno, quiero estar segura… ¡estar segura! —fue lo único que acertó a responder.

A lo cual Kate replicó:

—En tal caso, ¡asegurémonos!

—He pensado —dijo Milly— que te gustaría ayudarme. Pero debo pedirte que me prometas guardar el más completo silencio.

—Y ¿cómo, si estás enferma, vas a dejar a tus amigos en la ignorancia?

—Si lo estoy, por supuesto, tendré que decírselo. Pero aún puedo durar mucho tiempo —Milly lo dijo mirando, casi con fascinación, los ojos maquillados de su amiga. Seguía inmóvil delante de ella, pero con el rostro iluminado—. Sería una de mis ventajas. Creo que podría morir sin que nadie se diera cuenta.

—¡Eres extraordinaria! —exclamó por fin su amiga, visiblemente conmovida—. ¡Vaya un momento para hablar de estas cosas!

—Precisamente por eso no hablaremos —dijo Milly volviendo a dominarse—. Sólo quería estar segura de que podía contar contigo.

—¡Aquí, en mitad de…! —Pero Kate sólo pudo suspirar sorprendida y casi con lástima.

Pasó un rato en el que su amiga esperó que dijese algo más; en parte como si tuviese el tímido pero profundo deseo de conocer su opinión; y en parte como si la insinuación de su piedad diese cierto sentido a su fantasiosa conversación con lord Mark, la primera vez que fueron a cenar a casa de la señora Lowder. Justo eso —la compasión de la joven guapa y su amistosa manera de renunciar a sus propias fuerzas— era lo que había predicho ella entonces. Recogió la frase de Kate, como si de verdad quisiera saborearla mejor.

—Aquí en mitad ¿de qué?

—De todo. No hay nada que no puedas conseguir. Nada que no puedas hacer.

—Eso dice la señora Lowder.

Kate la miró fijamente como si esperase que añadiera algo más; luego, no obstante, exclamó:

—¡Todos te queremos!

—¡Sois maravillosos! —se rio Milly.

—No nosotros sino tú. —Y Kate pareció sorprenderse por el verdadero interés del asunto—. ¡En tres semanas!

Milly continuó:

—¡Nunca he visto gente mejor avenida! Razón de más —añadió— para no atormentarla sin motivo.

—¿Y yo? ¿Qué pasa conmigo? —preguntó Kate.

—Bueno… —Milly se quedó pensativa—, si hay algo que soportar, lo soportarás.

—Pero ¡no lo soportaré! —exclamó Kate Croy.

—¡Claro que sí! Me compadecerás, pero me ayudarás mucho. Y confío totalmente en ti. Ya ves cómo estamos.

Y así estaban, puesto que Kate no tuvo más remedio que aceptarlo; sin embargo Milly tuvo la sensación de que era sobre todo ella la que estaba donde quería llegar. Quería demostrarse a sí misma que no culpaba de un modo horrible a su amiga por sus reservas; y ¿qué mejor prueba que esa especial confianza? Si quería demostrarle que de verdad creía que Kate la apreciaba, ¿qué mejor manera de demostrárselo que pidiéndole ayuda?

III

Lo que ocurrió en realidad por la mañana, en esa primera ocasión en que Kate la acompañó, fue que el gran hombre tuvo que disculparse, pues, por un raro accidente —por lo general, respetaba rigurosamente las horas de consulta—, sólo pudo dedicarle diez minutos, que, no obstante, puso a su servicio de una manera que a ella le pareció aún más admirable por la claridad del cristal de la gran copa de atención que puso entre los dos sobre la mesa. Su coche estaba esperándole, pero enseguida le dejó claro que quería volver a verla al cabo de uno o dos días, le dio hora y la disculpó con elegancia si era ella la que no podía acudir a la cita. Los minutos parecieron fluir demasiado deprisa para pasar revista al pequeño ejército de preguntas que quería plantearle, y probablemente se habrían despedido sin hacer otra cosa que quedar para otro día, de no haber sido porque al final Milly creyó haberse llevado una impresión. Dicha impresión, a medida que transcurrían esos últimos instantes, fue que, inesperadamente, podría hacer otro amigo sincero en un mundo muy distinto, un amigo que además sería el mejor dotado, el más apropiado y el más indicado, puesto que lo sería de manera científica, ponderada y demostrable, y no sólo por motivos sociales. Literalmente, además, la amistad de *sir* Luke Strett no dependía de ella ni lo más mínimo: tal vez lo que más la hizo balbucir y jadear fue que comprendió que podía interesarle más de lo que había pensado y que podía verse arrastrada por una corriente que se perdería en el mar de la ciencia. No obstante, al mismo tiempo que se debatía, se rindió; hubo un momento en el que casi dejó de hablar y de explicarse, y quedó, sin violencia, únicamente con un temblor inútil que un instante después se convirtió en un silencio profundo e inquisitivo, a merced de su buena voluntad. El rostro ancho y sereno de *sir* Luke, aunque firme, no era tan implacable como le había parecido al principio; más bien, una curiosa mezcla, o eso le pareció, entre el de un general y el de un obispo, y pronto llegó a la conclusión de que, dentro de esos límites, le mostraría lo mejor y lo que más le convenía. En otras palabras, había establecido, para ahorrar tiempo, una relación con él; y dicha relación fue el trofeo que se llevó consigo. Era como una posesión plena, un nuevo recurso, algo envuelto con la seda más suave y plegado debajo del brazo de la memoria. No lo tenía al llegar, pero sí cuando se fue; lo llevaba debajo del abrigo, disimulado e invisible, cuando volvió a enfrentarse sonriente a Kate Croy. La joven señorita la había esperado, como es lógico, en otra sala, donde, cuando el gran hombre se marchó, no había nadie más esperando, y se puso en pie con un rostro compasivo más apropiado para la sala de espera de un dentista. «¿Ya te la ha extirpado?», parecía preguntar, como si de verdad se tratase de una muela; y Milly no la hizo esperar.

—Es un hombre encantador. Tengo que volver otro día.

—Pero ¿qué te ha dicho?

Milly estaba casi alegre.

—Que no me preocupe por nada y que, si soy una buena chica y hago exactamente lo que me dice, podrá cuidarme muchos, muchos años.

Kate pareció dudar como si no acabara de entenderlo.

—Pero ¿admite que estás enferma?

—No sé qué es lo que admite, y me da igual. Lo sabré y, sea lo que sea, será. Lo sabe todo de mí, y me gusta. No me incomoda lo más mínimo.

No obstante, Kate no apartaba los ojos de ella:

—Pero ¿cómo ha podido preguntarte en tan poco tiempo…?

—Apenas me ha hecho preguntas… No necesita esas tonterías —respondió Milly—. Lo comprende. Lo sabe —insistió—; y, cuando vuelva, habrá meditado un poco mi caso y todo irá bien.

Pasados unos minutos, Kate pareció contentarse con eso.

—Entonces, ¿cuándo tenemos que volver?

Su amiga se paró en seco, pues mientras hablaban —al menos ésa fue una de las razones— la vio de

pronto bajo la luz de su *otra* identidad, la que tendría para el señor Densher. Era siempre una luz imprevisible, que, aunque podía desaparecer de un momento a otro más deprisa de lo que había surgido, era necesariamente turbadora. Emanaba, con una perversidad propia, del hecho de que, a medida que transcurrían las horas y los días, las ocasiones de nombrarlo disminuían extrañamente. Había veinte o cincuenta, pero ninguna llegaba a materializarse. La presente coyuntura no era la más apropiada para aludir a él, pero, aun así, Milly comprendió que iba a ser otro día caracterizado por el silencio. Lo percibió en un instante muy breve y también reparó en la inconsciencia de Kate. No obstante, fue lo bastante largo para matizar su respuesta. No, le había demostrado a Kate lo mucho que confiaba en ella; y con eso bastaba para probarle su lealtad.

—¡Oh!, querida, ahora que hemos roto el hielo, no volveré a molestarte.

—¿Es que vas a venir sola?

—No tengo ningún reparo. Lo único que pido, por favor, es tu total discreción.

Fuera, a cierta distancia de la puerta, en la ancha acera, tuvieron que esperar de nuevo a que regresara el coche que había alquilado Milly, pues el cochero, por razones que sólo él conocía, había decidido dar una vuelta a la plaza cercana. El portero les advirtió de que estaba completando el circuito y Kate prosiguió mientras esperaban.

—Pero ¿no crees que pides mucho comparado con lo que das?

Milly se detuvo aún más en seco cuando la oyó. Pero siguió sonriendo.

—Entiendo. En ese caso, puedes contarlo.

—No quiero contarlo —respondió Kate—. Seré muda como una tumba si me cuentas la verdad. Lo único que quiero es que no me ocultes tu verdadero estado.

—Pues no lo haré. Pero tú misma puedes ver —prosiguió Milly— cómo estoy en realidad. Contenta. Feliz.

Kate la miró un buen rato.

—¡La verdad es que pareces satisfecha de cómo han salido las cosas…!

Kate le devolvió la mirada sin el menor doblez y pensando sólo en lo que habían hablado. Había dejado de ser la imagen del señor Densher; ya no era más que ella misma, y no por eso menos guapa. Aun así lo que habían acordado era justo y tendría que bastar.

—Pues claro. Me siento, no sabría describirlo de otro modo, como si me hubiese arrodillado delante de un cura. Me he confesado y he sido absuelta. Me han quitado un peso de encima.

Kate no apartó la vista.

—Debes de haberle gustado mucho.

—¡Oh, los médicos! —respondió Milly—. Aunque espero —añadió— no haberle gustado demasiado. —Luego, como quisiera ocultarse del escrutinio de su amiga o le impacientara la tardanza del coche, que seguía sin aparecer, desvió la mirada y contempló la plaza ancha y vetusta. Su vetustez, no obstante, no era más que la de un Londres bastante fatigado, el Londres tardío y acalorado que ya había bailado todo lo que tenía que bailar y dicho todo lo que tenía que decir; el aire parecía cargado de imágenes borrosas y ecos entremezclados, y le produjo una impresión que un momento después escapó de sus labios apretados—. ¡Oh, qué grande y hermoso es el mundo, y la gente también, sí, la gente…!

Volvió a mirar a Kate y deseó que no pensara que había estado llorando como debió de ocurrirle a lord Mark delante de los retratos en Matcham.

Kate, en todo caso, la entendió:

—¿Tanto se esfuerzan en ser amables?

—Sí, mucho —respondió agradecida Milly.

—¡Oh —se rio Kate—, te ayudaremos a salir de ésta! Y ¿no vas a traer a la señora Stringham?

Milly, al cabo de un instante, volvió a ser muy clara.

—No hasta que me haya visto una vez más.

Dos días después comprobaría lo acertado de su decisión; y, no obstante, cuando, según lo acordado entre los dos, volvió a visitar a su distinguido amigo —carácter en el que se había reafirmado más si cabe desde entonces— lo primero que le preguntó fue si había ido acompañada. Ante esa pregunta, se lo contó todo, liberada ya de su anterior vergüenza, dada incluso —o eso le pareció— a una locuacidad excesiva y nada alarmada por la posibilidad de que el médico hubiese preferido que no hubiera ido sola. Fue como si, en las cuarenta y ocho horas transcurridas, su relación se hubiese consolidado y lo que él sabía sobre su caso hubiera sufrido misteriosas adiciones. Apenas habían pasado ni diez minutos juntos, pero la relación tan bellamente fundada en ese breve espacio de tiempo estaba ahí y lo único que hacía falta era reanudarla, no por mera cordialidad profesional por parte del médico, o por una especie de amabilidad de cabecera que

a Milly le habría disgustado, sino más bien por su aire agradable y calmado, como si se hubiera interesado por ella, preguntando por aquí y por allá hasta enterarse de lo que necesitaba saber. Por supuesto era inconcebible que hubiese preguntado ni que hubiera querido hacerlo; no tenía a su alcance ninguna fuente de información, y no había necesitado ninguna: lo había descubierto gracias a su genio, y con eso Milly se refería a que lo había descubierto todo. Ahora sabía no sólo que no le disgustaba que la hubiera descubierto, sino que había ido precisamente a eso, y que, al menos por el momento, dispondría de una base firme en la que apoyarse. De pronto supo, como no lo había sabido hasta entonces, que nunca la había tenido. Sería raro encontrarla, al fin y al cabo, enterándose en circunstancias tan agradables de que estaba en cierto sentido condenada; pero, por encima de todo, demostraría que, hasta ese instante apenas había tenido nada a lo que aferrarse. Si ahora debía recurrir como único sostén al simple proceso —ya que ése parecía ser su destino— de su declive, sólo serviría para dar fe de su breve y extraña historia. Este sentimiento de vaga molestia ni siquiera había sido un proceso; y era cierto y ridículo que ir allí para ver cómo ponían su vida en la balanza representaba su primera aproximación a una vida ordenada. Ésta era la versión novelesca de Milly: que su vida, sobre todo a partir de esa segunda visita, había sido puesta en la balanza; y lo mejor de la relación que habían iniciado era que aquel hombre serio y encantador sabía, y había sabido desde el primer momento, que su versión era novelesca, y la había aceptado. Su única duda, su único temor, era si no se aprovecharía de que ella fuese un poco dada a novelerías para tratarla como un personaje de novela. Sin duda era un riesgo, pero ya se vería y, en general, los peligros se iban disipando poco a poco.

El sitio mismo, al cabo de unos minutos, el salón «bonito» y espacioso, al fondo de la vieja y elegante mansión, donde no se oía ni un ruido, un poco amarillento por tantos años de fama y ligeramente sombrío incluso a mediados del verano, pareció adoptar un aire familiar y cotidiano y se alzó en torno a ella repleto de promesas y certezas. Había viajado para ver mundo y ésta iba a ser la luz del mundo, el denso crepúsculo de la parte de atrás de una casa londinense, éstas serían las paredes del mundo, éstas las cortinas y la alfombra. Acabaría familiarizándose con el gran reloj de bronce y los adornos de la repisa de la chimenea, lejanos y conspicuos testimonios de agradecimiento; sería una más en el círculo de eminentes contemporáneos, cuyas fotografías, grabados y autógrafos, enmarcados detrás de un cristal, completaban la decoración y ofrecían tanto consuelo; y, mientras pensaba en las verdades ilimitadas e intactas que esa paz que se extendía entre pausas y esperas habría guardado durante años y años, también se preguntó qué le regalaría ella para expresarle su gratitud. Sería algo mejor que aquellos recios bronces victorianos. Era justo un ejemplo de lo que intuía que él había adivinado antes de dar la consulta por terminada: que estaba fantaseando en presencia de cosas mucho más apremiantes. Ésos eran sus secretos, que no valía la pena formular. Habría sido un secreto para cualquier otro que, de no haber sido por una amable dama a la que había escogido antes de emprender el viaje, no habría tenido ninguna amiga mínimamente cercana, a quien pedirle que la acompañara: nadie al menos que pudiera garantizar un poco de respetabilidad. Pero no le importó que él lo supiera, como tampoco le importó que supiese que le había ocultado su visita a dicha dama. Había ido sola y había engañado a su amiga, con el pretexto de ir de compras, del capricho de hacer no sé qué, de la diversión de ir sola por la calle. Ir sola por la calle era nuevo para ella, pues siempre salía con una amiga o una criada, pero no quería que el médico pensara que no podría afrontar lo que tuviese que decirle. A él le hizo gracia esa descripción de su valor; aunque no lo demostró ofreciéndole un burdo consuelo. Aun así no quiso saber a quién había engañado. ¿No la había acompañado una dama el miércoles?

—Sí… otra. No la que viaja conmigo. Se lo he contado.

Quedó claro que le hacía gracia y que no le importaba concederle tanto tiempo.

—¿Qué es lo que le ha contado?

—Pues que he venido a verle en secreto —respondió Milly.

—Y ¿a quién se lo contará ella?

—Es de fiar. A nadie.

—Bueno, y, si es de fiar, ¿no significa eso que tiene usted otra amiga?

No había que hacer muchos cálculos, pero aun así tuvo que pararse a reflexionar, pues comprendió que él quería completar, aunque fuese un poco, la imagen que tenía de ella para, por así decirlo, terminar de romper el hielo. No obstante, y más valía que lo supiese cuanto antes, debía comprender que era innecesario; y, por un instante, tuvo la sensación de ser una entendida en eso de romper el hielo. Por la propia naturaleza de su caso, nunca se libraría de cierta frialdad. Era de las pocas cosas que podía decirse con seguridad y creyó comprender que así sería mucho más sencillo.

—Sí, pero las dos juntas no pueden, no sé cómo decirlo, cambiar las cosas. Es decir, que cuando estás

verdaderamente sola… Nunca he visto una amabilidad igual. —Se interrumpió un minuto mientras él aguardaba, como si tuviese sus motivos para animarla a hablar. Milly no quería llorar en público por tercera vez. Nunca había visto una amabilidad igual y no deseaba parecer ingrata; pero sabía lo que la esperaba, y ceñirse a lo que le interesaba no era ingratitud—. Mi situación es la que es. Me atañe sólo a mí. Lo demás resulta conmovedor, pero es inútil. Ellas no pueden hacer nada. Por eso he venido sola. Quiero estarlo, a pesar de la señorita Croy, que es quien me acompañó la última vez. Si usted puede ayudarme, tanto mejor; y también, por supuesto, si yo puedo hacer algo. Pero, aparte de que usted y yo hagamos cuanto podamos, prefiero que me vea exactamente como soy. Sí, lo prefiero… y no exagero. ¿No vale la pena mostrar lo peor desde el principio para que después todo parezca mejor? No supondría, ni supondrá, ninguna diferencia para nadie. Así es como me siento con usted, tal como soy; y, si quiere saberlo, me ayuda mucho.

Aludió a su interés porque su actitud pareció ofrecerle la oportunidad de hacerlo y decidió aprovecharla. Fue una impresión rara e íntima que la conmovió mucho. Fue como si —a pesar de sí mismo— permitiese que cosas relativamente remotas, cosas, como habría dicho ella, bastante exteriores, tuviesen para él cierta relevancia; como si se interesara por ella por otros motivos aparte del que la había llevado allí. A ella le pareció natural en un espíritu científico tan excepcional como sin duda era el suyo, pues de lo contrario no estaría allí; pero, al mismo tiempo, lo interpretó como una fuente directa de luz sobre sí misma, aunque eso pudiera dar a entender que pretendía ponerse a su altura. Querer conocer a un paciente más allá de su constitución o de su enfermedad no podía ser, incluso entre los mejores médicos, más que una expresión de su deseo de abandonarlo. En ese caso, la razón evidente sólo podía ser la piedad; y, cuando la piedad exhibe su expresivo rostro igual que una cabeza en una pica asomando por la ventana en la Revolución francesa, ¿qué otra cosa cabe concluir sino que el enfermo está grave? Podía decir lo que quisiera, pero ella había visto la cabeza en la ventana; y de hecho, desde ese momento, sólo deseó oír lo que tuviera que decir. Podía expresarlo con la mayor facilidad pues ni una sola de sus suposiciones podía molestarle. Además, había querido que hablase y ella había hablado, por lo que podía deducir que no tenía miedo. Si quería complacerla bastaba con que demostrase creerla; aunque su esfuerzo por no engañarle llevase implícita la idea un tanto presuntuosa de que era tan buena como él. Daba a entender que se le podía engañar; y, de hecho, durante unos segundos, intercambiaron varias miradas que dejaron claro que los dos sabían el terreno que pisaban. Fue como un destello en aquel antiguo y amarillento templo de la verdad; luego quedó claro que, pese a todo, él la tenía en sus manos y continuó exhibiendo hasta el final su vaga y amable sonrisa. Tanta amabilidad era maravillosa en aquella penumbra; pero estaba claro que el brillo —el brillo del acero bien afilado— estaba reservado para la otra faceta del asunto, y acabaría apareciendo de un modo u otro.

—¿Quiere decir —preguntó— que no tiene ni un solo pariente, un padre o ni una hermana, ni siquiera una prima o una tía?

Ella negó con la cabeza con la desenvoltura de un fenómeno de feria o de una heroína acostumbrada a que la interrogaran.

—Ninguno. —Pero no había ido allí era para deprimirse—. Soy una superviviente de un naufragio. Ya ve —añadió— que conviene tener en cuenta que todos han muerto. Cuando tenía diez años, éramos seis, contando a mi padre y mi madre. Ahora sólo quedo yo. Murieron —prosiguió para ser lo más precisa posible— por causas distintas. Pero el caso es que así es. Y, como le he contado, soy norteamericana. No sé si eso lo empeora. Usted sabrá.

—Sí… —incluso pareció divertido—. Sé que, ante todo, la convierte en un caso muy interesante.

Ella suspiró agradecida; aunque como si, una vez más, hubiesen topado con los convencionalismos sociales.

—¡Ay, ya estamos!

—¡Oh, no, no estamos! Sólo estoy yo a su entera disposición. Tengo infinidad de amigos norteamericanos: y no podría usted hallarse en mejor compañía. Así estará con más gente, y no en la soledad más absoluta. —Luego continuó—: No dudo de su valor, pero no hay por qué enfrentarse a más cosas de las necesarias. —Y, un instante después, continuó explicándose—. Debe haber tenido una juventud muy difícil, pero no piense por eso que la vida sólo le reserva dificultades. Está en su derecho de ser feliz. Debe hacerse a la idea y aceptar la felicidad comoquiera que se le presente.

—¡Oh, la aceptaré en cualquiera de sus formas! —respondió casi con alegría—. Lo cierto es que tengo la sensación de aceptar una cada día. ¡Y ahora hablemos! —concluyó con una sonrisa.

—Todo va bien, dentro de lo que cabe. Puede confiar en que me tomaré el mayor interés —dijo el gran hombre—. Pero, después de todo, no soy más que un elemento entre cincuenta. Debemos recopilar muchos

más. Da igual que se sepa. Que se sepa, en fin, que usted y yo somos amigos.

—¡Ah!, quiere usted buscar a alguien —le interrumpió—. Quiere encontrar a alguien para que me cuide. —No obstante, como *sir* Luke expresó con su actitud que estaba acostumbrado a ese tipo de espontaneidad por parte de las jóvenes norteamericanas, y que incluso estaba familiarizado con sus familiaridades, Milly sintió que su libertad se estrellaba en vano contra su silencio, y enseguida se esforzó en pensar qué podía decir que fuese razonable. Decidió demostrarle que dicha libertad era ilimitada—. Será una gran ayuda, no crea que no lo sé. Puedo hacer lo que quiera, lo que me venga en gana en este ancho mundo. No hay nadie que me cuestione, ni que levante un dedo para detenerme. Puedo ir y venir hasta acabar exhausta. Tal vez no todo sean alegrías, pero a muchos de mis conocidos les gustaría probarlo. —Él dio la impresión de ir a preguntarle algo, pero luego la dejó continuar, y ella siguió, pues vio que había comprendido que sus medios eran ilimitados. Se lo había dado a entender de ese modo, y ya no tendrían que aludir más a tan odioso asunto. Sin embargo, no pudo sino darse cuenta también de que había causado en su juicio, o al menos en sus sentimientos, pues, asombrosamente, los tenía, un efecto considerable. Todas las piezas habían encajado para él como esos cristalitos de colores que formaban combinaciones al mover la mano en el extremo de uno de esos calidoscopios poligonales de su infancia—. ¡Conque si hay algo que pueda hacer y que sirva de ayuda…!

—¿Está dispuesta a hacer cualquier cosa? Estupendo. —Le pareció muy bien y lo apreció en lo que valía; pero el tiempo iba pasando y tenían que tratar, siquiera provisionalmente, la cuestión principal. Que estuviese dispuesta a hacer cualquier cosa podía resultar muy conveniente, pero que tuviera que hacerlo parecía agradablemente vago. Así los dos parecieron convencerse de que estaba dispuesta, casi por educación, a llegar a extremos innecesarios, y el resultado fue que, después de muchas preguntas, auscultaciones, exploraciones, y notas sobre sus observaciones (y no las de Milly), que no llegaron a disipar esa vaguedad, los dos, o al menos nosotros, podían haber tenido la impresión de haber regresado de un esforzado pero inútil viaje al Polo Norte; lo cual supuso sin duda un cegador anticlímax cuando su amigo se abstuvo de darle instrucciones.

—No —le oyó repetir con claridad—. De momento no quiero que haga nada, tan sólo respetar unas pequeñas indicaciones que le daré después, y que me permita visitarla en su casa dentro de unos días.

Al principio le sonó a música celestial.

—Entonces conocerá a la señora Stringham.

A estas alturas a Milly ya no le importaba.

—Bueno, no me dejaré asustar por la señora Stringham. —Y, cuando volvió a preguntarle, repitió—: No, no; no la «mando» a ningún sitio. Inglaterra está bien, cualquier sitio donde se encuentre cómoda y a gusto le irá bien. Dice que puede hacer lo que quiera. Complázcame teniendo la bondad de hacerlo. Aunque, por supuesto, tendrá que marcharse de Londres en cuanto vuelva a verla.

Milly se quedó pensativa.

—¿Puedo regresar al continente?

—Desde luego, vuelva, vuelva al continente.

—Pero ¿cómo hará para verme? Aunque tal vez —añadió enseguida— no quiera seguir viéndome.

Él lo tenía previsto. Siempre lo tenía todo previsto.

—Iré adonde esté; aunque si lo que quiere decir es que no quiero que siga viéndome…

—¿Y bien?

Sólo entonces pareció titubear un poco.

—Vea todo lo que pueda. De eso se trata. No se preocupe por nada. Al menos no tiene preocupaciones. Es un privilegio muy raro.

Milly se levantó cuando le dijo que le enviaría sus indicaciones y le comunicaría la fecha de su visita, lo que equivalía a despedirla. No obstante, ella aún quería saber una o dos cosas más.

—¿También puedo regresar a Inglaterra?

—¡Por supuesto! Cuando quiera. Pero, siempre que vuelva, hágamelo saber cuanto antes.

—Ah —dijo Milly—, no pienso estar yendo y viniendo.

—Pues, si se queda con nosotros, tanto mejor.

La conmovió el modo en que controlaba su impaciencia, y le pareció tan admirable que cedió al deseo de disfrutarlo más.

—Entonces ¿no cree que esté loca?

—Tal vez sea eso —respondió con una sonrisa— lo único que le pase.

Ella lo miró un rato más.

—No, sería demasiada suerte. ¿Sufriré en cualquier caso?

—Ni lo más mínimo.

—Y ¿viviré mucho?

—Mi querida señorita —replicó su distinguido amigo—, ¿no ve que de lo que estoy intentando convencerla es precisamente de que se tome la molestia de vivir?

IV

Salió con estas palabras resonando hasta tal punto en sus oídos que, cuando se vio otra vez sola en la enorme plaza, fue como si se desplegaran de forma instantánea ante sus ojos. Su efecto fue una emoción que la empujó hacia delante, igual que si hubiese recibido un impulso simple, directo y, ante todo, fácil de obedecer. Se sentía fortalecida y comprendió por qué había querido ir sola. Nadie en el mundo podría haber participado de ese estado; ningún vínculo habría sido lo bastante próximo para que su acompañante anduviera a su lado sin cierta discordancia. Literalmente, sintió en ese primer arrebato que su única compañía debía ser la raza humana en general, presente e inspiradora, pero impersonal, y que su único campo debía ser, en ese momento y lugar, la gris inmensidad de Londres. Esta gris inmensidad se había convertido de pronto en su elemento; con eso era con lo que su distinguido amigo había abastecido, de momento, su mundo y tal era el semblante que, inevitablemente, debía adoptar la cuestión de vivir, tal como él se la había planteado, como una opción fruto de la voluntad. Siguió andando, sin debilidad, incluso con ímpetu, y se alegró de estar sola, pues nadie, ni Kate Croy, ni Susan Shepherd, habrían querido andar tan deprisa como ella. Lo último que le había preguntado era si podía ir a pie a casa o a cualquier otro sitio, y él había respondido casi divertido por su extravagancia:

—Por suerte es usted activa por naturaleza… Es estupendo, aprovéchelo. Sea activa, sin hacer tonterías, pues no es ninguna tonta, pero sea usted tan activa como quiera y como mejor le parezca.

Éste había sido, de hecho, el último empujón y el detalle que le produjo una extraña confusión que evocaba al mismo tiempo lo que había perdido y lo que le habían dado. Mientras seguía su paseo sin rumbo, le pareció sorprendente que ambas cosas estuviesen tan equilibradas: la habían tratado, ¿o no?, como si vivir estuviera al alcance de su mano, y, sin embargo, a nadie se le trata así, ¿verdad?, a no ser que esté claro que se va a morir. La antigua y mezquina sensación de seguridad había perdido todo su esplendor: la había dejado atrás para siempre. A cambio, le habían ofrecido el de una gran aventura, un extraordinario experimento o una lucha en la que podría participar con mayor responsabilidad que nunca. Era como si hubiese tenido que arrancarse del pecho un adorno conocido —una flor que le fuese familiar o una joya antigua— que formara parte de su atuendo cotidiano; y le hubiesen entregado para reemplazarla una extraña arma defensiva, un mosquete, una lanza o un hacha, que tal vez le diese un aspecto extraño, pero que la obligaba a esforzarse por parecer marcial.

Tuvo la sensación de llevarla ya a la espalda, así que anduvo de verdad como un soldado en un desfile, como si, para adiestrarla, le hubiesen ordenado cargar por primera vez. Pasó por calles desconocidas, por callejones sucios y polvorientos, entre fachadas de casas que no iluminaba la luz de agosto; se creyó capaz de recorrer kilómetros y kilómetros y deseó perderse; hubo ocasiones en las que, al detenerse en una esquina para determinar qué dirección seguir, estuvo a la altura de la recomendación que le habían hecho de que aprovechase que era activa. Tener motivos tan nuevos era un placer desconocido: afirmaría cuanto antes la opción de su voluntad; tomar posesión de lo que la rodeaba era una hermosa manera de empezar; y le daba igual que Susie pudiera preocuparse por su ausencia. Susie querría saber «qué había sido de ella», como decían en el hotel; pero ésta sería sólo una de las muchas sorpresas que la aguardaban. Sorpresa, sin duda, era lo que despertaban sus pasos; le parecía ver reflejados su imagen y su porte en los ojos de la gente. Se vio deambulando a veces por barrios evidentemente poco frecuentados por jóvenes neoyorquinas, con ropa oscura, plumas negras e incongruentemente calzadas que mirasen a todas partes con aire extravagante; a juzgar por la curiosidad que despertaba en los pasajes y los callejones que deseó que fuesen de los bajos fondos y en los que pululaban niños mugrientos y vendedores ambulantes, lo mismo podría haber llevado el mosquete al hombro y haber declarado abiertamente que marchaba por el sendero de la guerra. Pero el miedo a sobreactuar la llevó a iniciar aquí y allá alguna conversación y a preguntar el camino, aunque, para satisfacer las necesidades de la aventura, eso era lo último que quería saber. Lo malo

fue que al final lo encontró por casualidad: enseguida reparó en que había ido a parar a Regent's Park, por donde había paseado solemnemente en su carroza una o dos veces en compañía de Kate Croy. Pero esta vez se internó en él; ésa era la realidad, el mundo real estaba lejos de las avenidas ostentosas, en las extensiones de césped del centro del parque. Por todas partes había bancos, ovejas sucias de hollín, muchachos que jugaban ociosos a la pelota y cuyos gritos amortiguaba el espesor del aire; paseantes cansados y angustiados como ella y cientos de personas en su misma situación. ¿Qué les angustiaba en aquel lúgubre parque sino la vida misma? Podían vivir si querían, les habían dicho lo mismo que a ella: le parecía estar viéndolos en sus sillas, digiriendo la información, reconociendo, bajo una forma familiar y ligeramente distinta, la bendita y antigua verdad de que podían vivir si querían. Quiso sentarse en su compañía para compartir eso con ellos, e incluso buscó un banco vacío y despreció una silla que había cerca y por la que tendría que haber pagado.

Había abandonado pronto cualquier asomo de superioridad, aunque sólo fuese porque no tardó en darse cuenta de que estaba más fatigada de lo que creía. Eso y el peculiar encanto de la situación hizo que se entretuviese descansando; había cierto hechizo en que nadie supiese dónde se encontraba. Era la primera vez en su vida que le ocurría: hasta entonces siempre había habido una o varias personas que sabían dónde estaba, por lo que de pronto pudo decirse que eso no había sido vida. Lo de ahora podía serlo tal como le había insinuado su distinguido amigo. Cierto que le había pedido que no abusara, como tal vez estaba haciendo, de su soledad, pero también le había dicho que no desdeñara ninguna fuente legítima de interés. Llegó a la conclusión de que lo que él quería era que probara todas las fuentes posibles, y en el rato que pasó sentada en el banco comprendió que en esencia quería darle algo en lo que apoyarse. Si hubiera tenido que decirlo ella, lo habría llamado un sustento: el sustento que se procura a los débiles; y, mientras encajaba todas las piezas, pensó y pensó que así era como la estaba tratando. Por supuesto, ella había ido a verle como una enferma, aunque ¡con la taimada esperanza de que la creyera, en todo lo indispensable, una auténtica leona joven! Aunque no tuvo más remedio que aceptar que, a fin de cuentas, no había creído nada de ella; se consoló diciéndose que se había escabullido de una manera admirable, pero ¿acaso creía que podría seguir haciéndolo hasta el final? Sopesó la pregunta y siguió pareciéndole un poco injusta. En aquel momento tan extraordinario Milly pensó muchas cosas, algunas muy extrañas, pero, por suerte, antes de seguir su camino, llegó a una simplificación. La idea que le causó más extrañeza fue la de que tal vez él hubiese «salido» por una puerta para entrar acto seguido por otra con una caritativa y maravillosa falsedad. Aún la paralizó más pensar que tal vez a lo máximo que aspirara fuera, ocultamente, a hacerse pasar por su amigo. ¿No era eso lo que decían querer hacer las mujeres cuando rechazaban los avances de los hombres con los que no podían intimar? Sin duda era lo que creían poder hacer con los hombres con quienes no podían casarse. No obstante, no se le ocurrió que los médicos pudieran regirse por la misma ley con los enfermos que no podían ser sus pacientes: por fatua que pudiera parecer, había notado que su médico se había conmovido de un modo excepcional. El detalle fatídico —suponiendo que pudiese hablar así— era que creía haberle sorprendido intentando mostrar por ella algo más que simpatía. No había ido a verle con intención de gustarle, sino para que la juzgara, y un gran hombre como él debía estar acostumbrado a apreciar la diferencia. A ella podía gustarle él, como de hecho ocurría, pero eso era diferente, y más teniendo en cuenta que le parecía claramente compatible con dicho juicio. Pero todo habría sido muy confuso si, como decimos, no hubiese llegado en su ayuda una ola definitiva, piadosa, más bien fría, pero clarificadora.

Llegó de repente después de agotar las demás ideas. Se había preguntado por qué, si su caso era grave —y sabía a qué se refería con eso— le había hablado de lo que podía «hacer», siendo tan fútil; o, si no lo era, por qué había concedido tanta importancia al papel de la amistad. Llegó así, con su lucidez humilde y solitaria —si es que podía hablarse de lucidez en plena canícula en Regent's Park— a un extraño dilema: o bien se interesaba por ella, en cuyo caso estaba enferma, o no se interesaba y estaba sana. Hasta el momento, y mientras no se demostrara lo contrario, había «actuado», como decían en su país, como si se interesase. Era evidente que alguien sometido a tanta premura debía reservar sus incoherencias que probablemente fuesen su mayor diversión, para las grandes ocasiones. Que ella hubiese sabido sorprenderle arrojó luz sobre esa idea que, según hemos visto, se había atrevido concebir y que la había ayudado a aclarar sus sensaciones. La había distinguido, eso fue lo que la hizo estremecer. Ignoraba, ¿cómo iba a saberlo?, que ella era endiabladamente sutil, como lo son siempre los sospechosos, los suspicaces y los condenados. De hecho, él había reconocido a su manera esa sutileza, al interesarse por los elementos que la componían: su extraña raza, sus extrañas pérdidas, sus extrañas ganancias, su extraña

libertad, y, sin duda, por encima de todo, sus extraños modales, frecuentes entre los norteamericanos de clase alta, que, al no ser vulgares, justificaban cierta amabilidad y hacían más fácil disculparlos. Comprendía tales redundancias y disimulaba la compasión que le inspiraba, pero ella se sentía como si la desvistieran, desnudaran y expusieran a la vista de todos. La reducía a la condición de una muchacha pobre que, por ejemplo, no pudiera pagar el alquiler y contemplase ante sí la gran ciudad. Milly tenía que pagar el alquiler de su futuro y, comparado con eso, todo lo demás se desmoronaba en pedazos y se hacía jirones. Sin duda el gran hombre no había querido causarle esa impresión. En fin, debía volver a casa, como la muchacha pobre, y ya se vería. Alguna manera tenía que haber… Ella también pensaría. Tal vez estuviese al alcance de la mano. Volvió a mirar a sus melancólicos camaradas desperdigados por el parque —algunos tan melancólicos que estaban tumbados boca abajo en la hierba, apartados, sin querer saber nada, enterrados en vida—; una vez más, ante aquella alternativa en la que apenas quedaba espacio para elegir. Tal vez fuese más sorprendente que pudieras vivir si querías; pero era más atractivo, insinuante y, en suma, irresistible que quisieras vivir si podías.

Después, durante un día o dos, disfrutó más de lo que había aventurado imaginar, si es que no era una simple fantasía, engañando a Susie; y enseguida intuyó que la diferencia estaba en la simple fantasía, pues de eso se trataba, de estar contraatacando al gran hombre. Su intención de encontrarle —si lo hacía— una acompañante la convertía de pronto, o eso creyó, en irresponsable, y hacía que cualquier cosa que se le ocurriese estuviera justificada; aunque en el mismo instante en que se dispuso a disfrutar de esa impunidad encontró nuevos elementos de sorpresa, o al menos de especulación. Pensó que la señora Stringham la juzgaría con dureza, pues la descripción de su largo paseo a solas era casi cínico y superficial. Pero la buena mujer no se permitió la menor crítica, hasta el punto de que Milly se sintió tentada de dudar de si Kate Croy no habría sido desleal. ¿No le habría dado, movida por la benevolencia y la preocupación, lo que ella habría llamado «un soplo» a la pobre Susie? Debemos añadir enseguida, no obstante, que, aparte de recordar la formalidad de la promesa de Kate, encontró enseguida la explicación en una verdad que tenía la virtud de ser general. Si Susie la había perdonado sospechosamente en esta ocasión, también era cierto que siempre estaba disculpándola de forma no menos sospechosa, con una compasión deslumbrante y excepcional. La joven era consciente de que a veces le manifestaba una deferencia inescrutable e impenetrable que, sin pretenderlo, iba en contra de la familiaridad y dificultaba la intimidad entre las dos. Era como si se limitase a observar los modales y las reglas de la etiqueta cortesana, lo que ayudó a nuestra joven a comprenderla justa y cabalmente. Vio con claridad, aunque no con mucha solidez, que para ella era una necesidad tratarla como si fuese una princesa; y nada podía hacer si su amiga tenía tan trascendental concepto de cómo había que tratar a las princesas. Susan había leído historia, había leído a Gibbon, a Froude y a Saint-Simon[28]; y concedía mucha importancia a los privilegios de esa casta: si los veía, desde su infancia, débiles, sobreprotegidos, inevitablemente irónicos e infinitamente refinados, una no podía menos que encontrar gracioso que se inclinara a sentir una indulgencia de lo más bizantina. ¡Y… quién pudiera ser bizantina! ¿No era eso lo que la obligaba a una a desear insidiosamente? Milly intentó complacerla, pues realmente, en estos momentos, ser bizantina colocaba a Susie en un lugar muy bonito. A las grandes damas de esa raza —creyó recordar que Gibbon lo decía en algún sitio— no se les pregunta por sus misterios. Pero ¡ay, de la pobre Milly y los suyos! Susan, en todo caso, fue menos inquisitiva que si hubiese sido un mosaico de Rávena. Susan era un monumento de porcelana a la extraña moraleja de que la discreción podía, como el cinismo, tener sus abismos. Además, ¡por fin los puritanos eran derrotados! ¿A cuántas generaciones hambrientas no estaría compensando, en su imaginación, la señora Stringham?

Aquella misma tarde, poco antes de la cena, Kate fue directa al hotel de manera pública y notoria en un cabriolé que, conducido al parecer a toda prisa, se detuvo al pie de sus habitaciones casi con el estrépito de un accidente o un choque. Milly, que se hallaba sola en el inmenso vacío decorado del salón dando vueltas, un poco como una bizantina encerrada, en el prolongado y casi siniestro crepúsculo, que a pesar de todo le gustaba, salió al oír el ruido —pues una de las cristaleras estaba abierta— al balcón que daba, con muchas pretensiones, a la entrada principal, y tuvo tiempo de reparar en la mirada que Kate echó a la fachada, después de apearse y pagar al cochero. La visitante esperó a que le devolvieran un chelín de cambio, y Milly la observó desde el balcón y se produjo un mudo intercambio de sonrisas y movimientos de cabeza a propósito de lo ocurrido esa mañana. Ése era el motivo de la visita de Kate y, para Milly, determinó, casi por azar, el tono de la conversación antes de que subiera su amiga. También quedó claro, de manera inevitable, que la imagen que le ofrecía, la de la espléndida joven que parecía aún más bella cuando se impacientaba con la graciosa libertad de sus gestos, era propiedad particular de la visión de otro; que dicha libertad era, en suma, la que exhibía ante el señor Densher. Así era exactamente como la veía él, y también como la veía Milly, con la extraña sensación de verla a través de los ojos de aquella otra persona. Como de

costumbre, aquella extraña sensación no duró ni cincuenta segundos; pero aun así no dejó de causar efecto. De hecho causó más de uno, que expondremos por orden. El primero fue que a nuestra joven le pareció absurdo fingir que una joven pudiera ser tan seductora para un hombre sin que se produjeran más consecuencias; y el segundo que, cuando Kate entró en el salón, Milly había comprendido la consecuencia que tendría para sí misma.

Lo demostró enseguida en respuesta al franco «¿Y bien?» de Kate. La pregunta, planteada con la vehemencia habitual de Kate, se refería, por supuesto, a lo sucedido aquella mañana, a la última prueba de sabiduría del gran hombre, y sin duda afectó un poco a Milly, como la alegre demanda de noticias puede afectar a un espíritu turbado cuando las noticias no están preparadas para ser comunicadas de alguna forma bonita. No habría sabido decir con exactitud qué fue lo que la decidió en ese mismo instante; tal vez la explicación más aproximada habría sido que fue una impresión más vívida de todo lo que su amiga daba por supuesto. El contraste entre esa libre cantidad y el laberinto de posibilidades en el que ella, desde hacía horas, se esforzaba por abrirse camino, tenía tal crudeza que ni siquiera sus modales amistosos sirvieron para atenuarlo: de hecho, la ayudó a comprender que no tenía nada que decirle. Aparte de lo cual, hubo sin duda algo más, una influencia si cabe menos clara en esa particular situación. Kate había perdido, al subir, la apariencia que despertaba en su joven anfitriona tan sutiles reflexiones y una de cuyas características era que apenas duraba unos segundos; sin embargo, ahí estaba, en todo su esplendor y su fuerza, convertida otra vez, antes que nada, en la «joven guapa» por la que la había tomado agradecida Milly la primera vez, y recibirla en tono quejoso habría equivalido a una rendición y una confesión. Ella nunca estaría enferma; el mejor médico del mundo apenas le dedicaría, en el peor de los casos, unos minutos; y fue como si hubiera preguntado desde esa inmunidad por todo lo que era mortal en su amiga. Todas estas cosas danzaron su peculiar danza en el interior de Milly, pero la vibración que produjeron y el polvo que levantaron duraron menos que lo que hemos tardado en contarlo. Antes casi de darse cuenta, respondió con desenvoltura, sin tener la conciencia de estar mintiendo, y con una súbita llamarada de la famosa «fuerza de voluntad» de la que tanto había leído y oído hablar y que era lo que le había aconsejado su médico.

—¡Oh, todo bien! Es encantador.

Kate estaba espléndida y Milly, en caso de haber necesitado más pruebas, habría comprendido entonces que no le había dicho ni una palabra a la señora Stringham.

—Entonces ¿tus preocupaciones eran absurdas?

—Absurdas. —Era una palabra muy sencilla, pero nada más pronunciarla nuestra joven tuvo la sensación de haber hecho algo para protegerse.

Kate estaba pendiente de las palabras que salieran de sus labios.

—¿No tienes nada?

—Nada de lo que preocuparme. Necesitaré cierto seguimiento, pero no tendré que hacer nada horrible, ni siquiera incómodo. De hecho, puedo hacer lo que quiera.

A Milly le pareció sorprendente que bastara con formularlo así para que encajaran todas las piezas.

Sin embargo, antes incluso de que produjesen todo su efecto, Kate la había abrazado, besado y bendecido.

—¡Cariño, qué dulce eres! ¡Es maravilloso! Ya te dije que estaba segura. —Luego pareció comprender toda la belleza de la noticia—. Y ¿puedes hacer lo que quieras?

—Sí. ¿No te parece estupendo?

—¡Ah, pero te he pillado —la interrumpió con alegría— sin hacer nada…! Y ¿qué vas a hacer?

—De momento sólo disfrutar. Disfrutar —Milly estaba luminosa— de haber salido tan bien librada.

—¿Te refieres a haber sabido tan fácilmente que estás bien?

Fue como si Kate le hubiese sugerido la respuesta.

—Me refiero a haber sabido tan fácilmente que estoy bien.

—Aunque, por supuesto, nadie está tan sano como para quedarse ahora en Londres. No puede exigirte una cosa así —prosiguió Kate.

—Por suerte no… Tengo que recorrer mundo.

—¿Pero no querrá que vayas a horribles y aburridos balnearios como Engadina o la Riviera?

—No, como te he dicho, puedo ir donde me apetezca. Se supone que tengo que viajar por placer.

—¡Genial! —Kate abundaba en sus familiaridades—. Pero ¿qué tipo de placer?

—El más excelso —respondió Milly con una sonrisa.

Su amiga respondió con idéntica nobleza.

—Y ¿cuál es?

—Ahora es nuestra ocasión de averiguarlo. Tienes que ayudarme.

—Y ¿qué otra cosa he querido hacer —preguntó Kate— desde el día en que te conocí? —No obstante Kate se sorprendió al oírla—. ¡Me gusta tu forma de hablar! ¿Qué ayuda puedes necesitar con lo afortunada que eres?

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Milly no supo qué responder; así que de momento llegó a la conclusión, tan extrañamente subrayada por su visita, de que la verdad era que su amiga gozaba de una salud envidiable. Desde esa noche, lo tuvo presente todas y cada una de las horas que le quedaban, y tanto más ahora que quizá estaban contadas. Lo único que de verdad esperaba era la prometida visita de *sir* Luke Strett, y ya había decidido cuál sería su proceder con él. Ya que quería conocer a Susie, le dejaría las manos libres y que juzgara por sí mismo. Que arreglasen lo que quisieran entre ellos, y que hiciesen lo que creyeran necesario para quitarle un peso del alma. A fin de cuentas, si el buen hombre quería inflamar a Susan Shepherd con un ideal aún más elevado, en el peor de los casos sólo tendría que lidiar con ella. Si, en una palabra, era devoción lo que se proponía organizar aquella pareja, ella estaba dispuesta a consumirla como un plato bien cocinado. Le había preguntado por su «apetito» y ahora comprendía que había respondido de manera más bien vaga. Pero entonces supo que, en lo que a devoción se refería, sería un apetito inmenso. Ávido, insaciable, voraz… ésos eran sin duda los calificativos exactos. En cualquier caso, se había resignado de antemano a soportar las maquinaciones de la compasión. El día siguiente de su excursión solitaria iba a ser uno de los últimos de su estancia en Londres, y, en materia de vida social, esa noche era la última. A estas alturas ya se había marchado casi todo el mundo, y muchos de los que habían tenido la generosidad de ir a verlas o de enviarles tarjetas de visita para invitarlas a distintos sitios, se habían volatilizado; ya fuesen miembros del círculo íntimo de la señora Lowder o del de lord Mark, pues nuestras amigas ya eran incapaces de distinguirlos. La temporada había decaído y las pocas ocasiones sociales que todavía se presentaban eran pocas y especiales. Una de ellas, para Milly, era la ya citada visita del médico, que le había mandado una nota; la otra única ocasión de relevancia era su despedida —por un período muy breve— de la señora Lowder y Kate. La tía y la sobrina iban a disfrutar con ellas de una cena íntima e informal, o al menos tan informal como lo permitiera el hecho de que después tenían que asistir a una fiesta que empezaba absurdamente tarde y a la que la tía Maud había juzgado aconsejable asistir. *Sir* Luke iba a ir por la mañana y Milly trazó un plan para solventar esta complicación.

La noche en todo caso era calurosa y sofocante y, cuando las cuatro damas se juntaron para pasar la pequeña velada en el hotel con los balcones abiertos y las llamas de las velas detrás de las pantallas rosadas, colocadas como para una vigilia e inmóviles en el aire desfallecido de la estación, era ya bastante tarde. Pronto quedó claro que Milly, que se mostró más firme de lo habitual, no se sentía obligada a subir esa noche la escalera social por mucho que se extendiera para recibirla, y que la señora Lowder y la señora Stringham tendrían que afrontar solas esa prueba, pues Kate Croy se quedaría con su amiga a esperar su regreso. Milly, que siempre se alegraba de ver salir a Susan Shepherd, pues la veía marcharse con afecto y, le gustaba, por así decirlo, librarse de la gente por medio de ella, reparaba con satisfacción, al verla subir al coche, en la desnudez —como una marea claramente descendente— de su benévola espalda. Al mismo tiempo, salir con la divertida amiga de la joven norteamericana recién llegada en lugar de con la propia recién llegada, no era el ideal de la tía Maud, pero pocas cosas había tan reveladoras de las muchas virtudes de esta señora que el espíritu con que —en situaciones así— aprovechaba al máximo la menor de las ventajas. Y lo hacía con una alegre falta de ilusión; incluso llegaba a confesárselo a la pobre Susie, porque, con franqueza, tenía buen natural. Cuando la señora Stringham afirmó que su luz era sólo prestada y que se la apreciaba sólo por ser un eslabón, por fortuna no perdido, la tía Maud estuvo de acuerdo hasta el punto de llegar a decir: «Bueno, querida, siempre eres mejor que nada». Esa noche, además, Milly comprendió que la tía Maud tramaba alguna cosa. La señora Stringham, antes de partir con ella, fue a buscar un chal o alguna otra prenda, y Kate, impaciente por verlas marchar, salió al balcón y se quedó allí un rato, aunque no había muchas más cosas que contemplar que las pálidas estrellas de Londres y la luz chillona, calle arriba, en una esquina, de una pequeña taberna, frente a la cual descansaba un caballo escuálido. La señora

Lowder aprovechó la ocasión y Milly tuvo la sensación al oírla de que actuaba movida en parte por la necesidad.

—La buena de Susan me ha contado que conociste al señor Densher en Estados Unidos, de quien ya habrás visto que no te he hablado hasta ahora. No obstante, ¿te importaría hacerme un favor relacionado con él? —Había bajado su hermosa voz hasta convertirla en un profundo susurro, pero seguía exhibiendo toda su labia; y Milly, tras un breve instante de sorpresa, adivinó el sentido de su petición—. ¿Podrías aludir a él en su presencia —la tía Maud hizo un gesto hacia el balcón— para averiguar si ha vuelto?

Muchas cosas encajaron entonces para Milly, a quien después le pareció sorprendente que pudiera reparar en tantas al mismo tiempo. No obstante, se obligó a sonreír.

—Pero no tengo mayor interés en averiguarlo. —El número de cosas aumentó y le pareció que había sido demasiado explícita. Así que se apresuró a serlo menos—. A no ser, claro, que a usted sí le interese. —Le dio la impresión de que la tía Maud la estaba mirando casi con la misma intensidad con que ella se esforzaba en sonreír, y eso le dio nuevos bríos—. Nunca le he hablado de él, y si lo hago ahora…

—¿Qué? —preguntó la señora Lowder.

—No sé, podría pensar que se lo he ocultado. Ella tampoco ha aludido nunca a él.

—No… —su amiga suspiró un poco—, ni lo hará. Así que, como comprenderás, es ella quien te lo oculta a ti.

Sí, Milly quería comprenderlo; pero eran demasiadas cosas.

—Por supuesto, no ha habido ninguna razón en particular. —Pero ésa no era la cuestión—. ¿Es que cree que ha vuelto? —preguntó.

—Tengo entendido que se proponía regresar por estas fechas, y me vendría muy bien saberlo con seguridad.

—Y ¿no puede preguntárselo usted misma?

—¡Ah, nunca hablamos de él!

Eso permitió a Milly hacer una cómoda pausa.

—¿Es que no le parece bien su amistad con ella?

La tía Maud esperó a su vez.

—No me parece bien la amistad de Kate con ese pobre joven. No le interesa.

—Y a él ¿le interesa mucho ella?

—Mucho, demasiado. Y mi miedo es —dijo la señora Lowder— que la acose en privado. Ella calla, pero no quiero que se preocupe. Ni tampoco —concluyó generosa y confidencialmente— que se preocupe él.

Milly hizo un gran esfuerzo por estar a la altura.

—Pero ¿qué puedo hacer?

—Averiguar dónde están. Si lo hago yo —le aclaró la señora Lowder—, parecerá que creo que me están engañando.

—Y no lo cree… —dijo meditativa Milly.

—Bueno —dijo la tía Maud, cuyos hermosos ojos de ónice no parpadearon a pesar de que las preguntas de Milly parecían haberla obligado a ir más allá de lo que tenía pensado en un principio—, Kate sabe muy bien lo que tengo pensado para ella, y que interpreto el hecho de que esté viviendo en mi casa, en el modo en que vive, si es que me entiendes, como una aceptación leal de mis planes. Por tanto, como dichos planes no incluyen en ningún caso al señor Densher, por mucho que me agrade en cierta medida… —Por tanto, en suma, se había visto obligada a dar ese paso, aunque terminó la frase con un aleteo de su enorme abanico.

No obstante, tal vez les fue útil que Milly tuviese la perspicacia de escoger la parte más clarificadora de sus palabras.

—Entonces ¿él es de su agrado?

—Pues claro, ¿a ti no te es simpático?

Milly esperó, pues la pregunta fue, en cierto modo, como una punta afilada cuando se clava en un nervio. Contuvo el aliento, pero se alegró, pues tuvo la sensación de haber escogido, con la rapidez suficiente, la respuesta que más le convenía entre muchas. Así que casi se sintió orgullosa de haber sonreído con alegría.

—¡Oh, sí, las tres veces que lo vi en Nueva York!

Así, con estas simples palabras, empezó y acabó la conversación que después, por la noche, le pareció la más difícil que había sostenido jamás. Lo que la desveló fue la dicha de no haberse rebajado a negar esa feliz impresión.

Además, a la señora Lowder también le gustaron sus sencillas palabras o, en todo caso, como demostró su risa, le parecieron naturales y subidas de tono.

—¡Qué encantadores sois los norteamericanos! Pero la gente puede ser muy simpática y no servir para lo que quieres.

—Sí —coincidió la joven—, supongo que incluso cuando lo que quieres es muy bueno.

—¡Ay, niña, necesitaría demasiado tiempo para explicarte lo que quiero! Lo quiero todo a la vez, y también muchas cosas para ti. Pero ya nos conoces —prosiguió la tía Maud—, y te habrás dado cuenta.

—¡Ah! —respondió Milly—, no me doy cuenta de nada —una vez más, como siempre, en oleadas, percibió cierta oscuridad—. Pero, si a nuestra amiga no le gusta él…

—¿Por qué creo que quiere ocultarme algo? —la señora Lowder respondió ella misma su pregunta—. Querida, ¿cómo puedes preguntarlo? Ponte en su lugar. Kate procura complacerme, pero a su manera. Las jóvenes orgullosas son jóvenes orgullosas. Y las viejas orgullosas son… en fin, como yo. Y, como tú nos aprecias, puedes ayudarnos.

Milly intentó estar inspirada.

—Entonces ¿todo se reduce a que se lo pregunte sin más?

Al oírla la tía Maud pareció rendirse por fin.

—¡Oh, si tantos motivos tienes para no hacerlo…!

—No tengo tantos —respondió Milly con una sonrisa—, sólo uno: si revelo de pronto que le conozco, ¿qué pensará de que no le haya hablado antes de él?

La señora Lowder adoptó un gesto inexpresivo.

—Y eso ¿qué más te da? Puede que sólo te hayas limitado a ser discreta.

—Y lo he sido —se apresuró a responder la joven.

—Además —prosiguió su amiga—, te di a entender, a través de Susan, que no le hablases de él.

—Sí, lo cual es una buena razón para mí.

—Y para mí —insistió la señora Lowder—. Kate no es tan idiota para no entender algo tan evidente. Puedes decirle que te había pedido que no le dijeses nada.

—Y ¿puedo decirle también que ahora me ha pedido que le hable de él?

La señora Lowder podía haber previsto la pregunta, que, no obstante, la dejó cortada.

—¿No puedes hacerlo sin…?

Milly se sintió casi avergonzada por poner tantos peros.

—Haré lo que esté en mi mano, si tiene la bondad de decirme una cosa más. —Le pareció tan indiscreto que titubeó un instante—. ¿Él le ha escrito?

—¡Eso, querida, es exactamente lo que me gustaría saber! —la señora Lowder por fin pareció impacientarse—. Pregúntale tú y estoy segura de que te lo dirá.

Ni siquiera entonces Milly se rindió del todo.

—Si se lo pregunto —dijo con una sonrisa— será por usted. —No obstante, no dejó a su interlocutora tiempo para responder—. La clave está en que, si le ha escrito, es posible que ella le haya respondido.

—Y ¿qué sutileza es ésa?

—No es ninguna sutileza, sino algo muy sencillo —dijo Milly—: si le ha respondido es muy posible que le haya hablado de mí.

—Casi seguro, desde luego. Pero ¿qué más da?

Por un momento, a la joven le pareció casi lógico que la señora Lowder fuese tan poco perspicaz.

—Tiene importancia porque él le habrá contestado que me conoce. Y eso, a su vez —explicó la joven—, hará que mi silencio resulte raro.

—¿Por qué, si ella es consciente de no haberlo sacado a colación? Lo único raro —insistió con lucidez la tía Maud— es que se lo haya callado.

—Pues ¡ya lo ve! —dijo Milly.

Evidentemente, sus palabras sorprendieron a su amiga.

—¿Es que te ha molestado?

La pregunta sólo sirvió para teñir de un delicado rubor el rostro de Milly.

—¡No, ni lo más mínimo!

Enseguida intuyó la necesidad de insistir y estuvo, en suma, a punto de afirmar que le traía sin cuidado. Pero también fue consciente de que había otras cosas de por medio. En primer lugar, la señora Lowder había comprendido de pronto que había ido más lejos de lo que quería. Milly no sabía juzgar sus motivos por la expresión de su rostro: su lustre suave y duro apenas era humano. Cuando era amable parecía severa, pero cuando era severa no parecía amable. No obstante, algo se removió en su interior, como una marea que se desbordara tras la rotura de un dique. Anunció que, si lo que le había pedido le causaba el menor contratiempo, no debía darle más vueltas; e hizo que su joven amiga, al reparar en su cambio de tono, le

diese muchas más. Milly, que siempre notaba esas cosas, sospechó que hablaba con lástima, por una especie de comprensión tardía; y el efecto de esa intuición fue singular: le demostró que Kate había sabido guardar su secreto. La tía Maud no sabía por boca de Kate los motivos por los que podía compadecerla y sólo estaba mostrando su faceta más amable, que en cualquier momento, por una preferencia o una energía inesperadas, podía brillar por intereses distintos al suyo. La tía Maud insinuó también que Milly parecía haber pensado en aquel asunto mucho más de lo que había imaginado; y esta observación afectó a la joven de una forma más aguda e incisiva que cualquier acusación de debilidad. Era lo que acabaría diciendo todo el mundo, si no iba con cuidado: «¡A ti te pasa algo!». Por lo que supo enseguida que debía dejar claro que no le pasaba nada.

—Me gustaría ayudarla; y, dentro de lo posible, también a Kate —se apresuró a decir; entretanto, sus ojos vagaron desde la habitación hasta la oscuridad del balcón, donde su amiga se demoraba de manera tal vez un poco inexplicable. Y dio las primeras muestras de impaciencia y casi demostró su extrañeza ante la oportunidad que les estaba brindando su amiga, al referirse, no obstante, al menos de palabra, a la otra con un—: Pues ¡sí que tarda en acicalarse Susie!

No obstante, la tía Maud pareció preocuparse por la alusión. Los ojos de ónice se clavaron en ella con una obstinación educada que equivalía a una mayor benevolencia.

—Olvídalo, querida. Al fin y al cabo, acabaremos enterándonos.

—Si ha vuelto, desde luego —replicó Milly, pasados unos instantes—, porque lo más probable es que la cortesía le empuje a venir a verme. Entonces —observó— nos enteraremos; pero no, como ve, por Kate, sino por él. A no ser —concluyó con una sonrisa— que no me encuentre.

Tuvo la clara sensación de haber interesado más a su interlocutora de lo que era su intención; fue como si su destino la empujase y no pudiera detenerse, igual que le había pasado con su médico.

—¿Es que vas a huir de él?

Evitó responderle, pues sólo quería zanjar la cuestión.

—Así —prosiguió— tratará usted directamente con Kate.

—¿Es que vas a huir de ella? —preguntó muy seria la señora Lowder justo cuando oyeron llegar a Susie a la sala contigua donde habían cenado.

Milly tuvo la sensación de que sólo disponía de un instante; y de pronto todo lo que creía relacionado con aquel asunto salió de sus labios en una pregunta que supo que no había logrado formular con desapasionamiento.

—¿Cree que están juntos?

La tía Maud lo entendió —es decir, entendió por su tono todo lo que ella no quería que entendiera—, y el resultado fue que se miraron a los ojos unos segundos. La señora Stringham había llegado ya, acababa de preguntar si Kate se había ido, y encontró respuesta en la reaparición de la joven. Volvieron a verla delante del balcón abierto, donde se había detenido para mirarlas al oír el imperioso «¡Chis!» que soltó la tía Maud. De hecho, ésta se apresuró a alejarse del peligro y emprendió la retirada con Susie; pero Milly notó que las palabras que acababa de decirle a propósito de que tratara directamente con su sobrina se estaban volviendo ya contra ella. Sería Milly quien, por mucho que intentara evadirse, tendría que ser directa; de hecho, nada le pareció tan directo como una evasión. Kate esperaba delante de la puerta del balcón, muy guapa y erguida: la oscuridad de fuera resaltaba de forma muy favorable su sencillo atuendo veraniego y la claridad del vestido. Dada la distancia que había entre las dos, Milly descartó que pudiese haber oído su conversación, pero Kate tenía la mirada atenta, como si gozara de cierta ventaja. Poco después, su amiga lo comprendió. La mirada perspicaz y la ventaja estaban ahora siempre a su disposición y no eran sino las de la persona que Milly sabía que conocía a Merton Densher. Una vez más, por espacio de unos segundos fue como si toda su identidad se redujese a la de esa persona a quién él conocía, lo cual obró otra certeza: a Kate le bastaba con quedarse donde estaba para darle a entender que él había vuelto. Fue, en suma, como si le dijera sin palabras que estaba en Londres, que tal vez estuviese a la vuelta de la esquina; ninguna conversación con Milly habría podido ser tan directa.

VI

Sin duda esta extraña forma de franqueza le pareció en sí misma más que suficiente de momento, por lo que no se percató hasta más tarde de que, en realidad —en el curso de la extraña e indescriptible conversación que precedió al regreso de sus amigas—, no había hecho nada por favorecerla. Si no se dio cuenta hasta después, en la larga y cegadora tortura del amanecer, fue porque, mientras duró la velada, se conformó con su aparente comodidad. Lo que sucedía al fondo se distinguía sólo en vislumbres y destellos, así que se contentó con ver lo que ocurría en el escenario. No habían pasado ni tres minutos antes de que Milly supiera que no debía hacer nada de lo que acababa de pedirle la tía Maud. Lo supo con la misma lucidez que la había guiado con dicha señora y con *sir* Luke Strett. Comprendió en ese momento y lugar que seguía inmersa en una corriente controlada, a causa de su indiferencia, timidez, valentía o generosidad —no habría sabido precisar qué—, por otras personas; que era la corriente y no ella quien actuaba, y que siempre estaba otro a cargo de la llave de la presa. Kate, por ejemplo, no tenía más que abrir las esclusas para que la corriente se volviera turbulenta y la obligara a hacer lo que quería. Y ¿qué quería Kate más que ser, de repente, más interesante de lo que había sido nunca? Esa noche, Milly contuvo el aliento admirada. Si no hubiese estado segura de que su amiga no podía saber nada de la conversación que acababa de tener con la señora Lowder, casi habría pensado que la admirable criatura había intervenido para anticiparse al peligro. En el rato que pasaron allí sentadas, dicha fantasía, no obstante, fue perdiendo fuerza, aunque sólo fuese porque se multiplicaron y agolparon otras muchas que acabaron pareciéndole a nuestra joven el boyante medio en el que hablaba y se movía su amiga. Como digo, pasaron el tiempo sentadas, aunque Kate se movió mucho mientras hablaba: inquieta y encantadora, tal vez un poco superficial, se levantó varias veces y recorrió la sala con su vestido claro, como si estuviese interpretando un papel para complacer a su anfitriona.

La señora Lowder le había dicho a Milly en Matcham que ella y su sobrina unidas podrían conquistar el mundo; pero, aunque ya entonces sus palabras habían tenido un vago y majestuoso encanto, la joven comprendió ahora mejor que nunca su significado. Kate podría conseguir por sí misma lo que quisiera, y ella, Milly Theale, probablemente sólo tuviese que preocuparse de la pequeña parte del mundo que más le afectaba y de la que tenía que preocuparse antes de nada. En ese sentido también ella podía hacer su propia conquista: tendría algo que ofrecer y Kate algo que tomar, por lo que ambas encajarían a su manera en el ideal de la tía Maud. A eso se reducía, en suma, todo: a que aquella velada a la luz de las velas era una especie de ensayo improvisado de una tragedia mayor. Milly sabía que disponían de ella, con generosidad y una dedicación absoluta, y se dejó llevar por la idea, convencida de que así recobraría fuerzas. Lo que Kate tenía que tomar lo tomaba agradecida, como si aceptara con cada una de sus lentas idas y venidas la relación establecida entre las dos y consagrara la rendición de su amiga sólo por el interés que ponía en esta relación. Como es lógico, nos referimos al interés que ponía Milly; pues el interés que ponía Kate probablemente le pareciera inferior a Milly. Emanaba en gran parte de su conversación, de lo deprisa que pasaron las horas antes de que se quebrase el hechizo y, bien pensado, de la circunstancia, no precisamente anormal, de que Kate estuviese en una «forma» extraordinaria. Milly recordó haberla oído decir que siempre daba lo mejor de sí a última hora de la noche; recordó que había pensado cuándo daba ella lo mejor de sí y lo feliz que debía de ser la gente que brillaba a horas fijas. No era su caso; nunca daba lo mejor de sí, a no ser que fuese, como en ese momento, escuchando, observando, admirando, derrumbándose. Por otro lado, si Kate nunca había estado tan bien, de manera un tanto implacable, la belleza y la maravilla de todo radicaba en que nunca había sido tan franca: era una persona de tal calibre, como habría dicho Milly, que incluso cuando te «utilizaba» y, por así decirlo, medía sus pasos, podía dejarse llevar y confiarte con ironía y cierta extravagancia cosas que no había contado nunca. Ésa fue su impresión: que le estaba contando cosas y muy probablemente para su propio consuelo; casi como si los errores de juicio, los fallos de

proporción y la inocencia residual del espíritu que debía corregir en su interlocutora fuesen de vez en cuando demasiado para sus nervios. Trató estas causas de irritación con una energía divertida que Milly habría podido considerar cínica y que en todo caso estaba justificada —su amiga lo dejó claro— por la manera en que el espíritu de los norteamericanos se estrellaba contra ciertas cuestiones. O al menos daba la impresión —el espíritu de los norteamericanos, encarnado en Milly, escuchaba entre emocionado y perplejo — de no entender la sociedad inglesa sin enfrentarse por separado a cada uno de sus elementos. No podía proseguir por… —quiso utilizar un tecnicismo y Milly le sugirió «analogía», «inducción» o «instinto», pero ninguno le pareció apropiado—, tenía que mostrarle y presentarle todas las facetas del monstruo, dejar que anduviera a su lado, ya fuese por el éxtasis consecuentemente exagerado o por la sorpresa si cabe aún más (como le pareció a este crítico) desproporcionada. El monstruo, concedió Kate, podía parecer amenazante a los nacidos entre formas menos desarrolladas y por tanto, sin duda, menos divertidas; podía tener facetas extrañas y temibles, estar concebido para devorar a los incautos, para humillar a los orgullosos y escandalizar a los buenos, pero no podías quedarte sentada: y tenías que aprender a convivir con él, y eso era, en suma, lo que la joven le estaba enseñando esa noche.

Renunció públicamente, en dicho proceso a Lancaster Gate y a todo lo que ahí se guardaba; renunció también —comprobó emocionada Milly— a la tía Maud y a todos sus faustos y glorias, y, sobre todo, renunció a sí misma, y eso fue, como es lógico, lo que más contribuyó a prestarle ese candor. No volvió a hablarle a su amiga al estilo de la tía Maud ni a decirle que juntas podrían alcanzar el cielo, sino que su brillante y perversa elección fue exponerle la necesidad, en primer lugar, de no ser ni vulgares ni estúpidas. Nuestra joven norteamericana podría haberlo interpretado como una lección sobre el arte de ver las cosas como son… una lección tan variada y bien fundamentada que la alumna no pudo, como hemos visto, más que quedarse boquiabierta. Lo raro era, además, que podía ser eficaz al tiempo que negaba explícitamente cualquier motivación personal. No era que le desagradara la tía Maud, como se había limitado a afirmar en otras ocasiones, sino que la pobre mujer marcada de forma indeleble y espantosa por la inescrutable naturaleza, no podía —¿cómo iba a poder?— ser lo que no era. No era nadie. No era nada. No estaba en ningún sitio. Milly no debía creer lo contrario, era su amiga y no podía permitirlo. Esas horas en Matcham habían sido *inesperées*[29] puro maná del cielo; o, si no eso, gracias al apoyo del viejo charlatán de lord Mark, un terreno inseguro para los cálculos y las esperanzas. No tenía nada que reprocharle a lord Mark, pero no era el hombre más inteligente de Inglaterra, e, incluso si lo fuese, seguiría sin ser el más generoso. Medía lo que daba hasta el último gramo, y en realidad ambos estaban siempre esperando a ver qué ofrecía el otro.

—Ella te ha ofrecido a ti —dijo Milly sin dejar el asunto— y creo que te refieres a que, mientras estés sobre el mostrador, no te soltará.

—¿A no ser —prosiguió Kate— que él me atrapase y echara a correr? ¡No está dispuesto a correr, así que mucho menos a atraparme! Estoy —en eso tienes razón— sobre el mostrador, cuando no en el escaparate; y me expone comercialmente según su conveniencia: es la esencia de mi situación, y el precio de la protección de mi tía.

Había empezado a hablar de lord Mark en cuanto estuvieron a solas; la impresión de Milly era que había recurrido a su nombre y lo había impuesto como tema de conversación, en oposición directa a aquel otro que la señora Lowder había dejado en el aire y que su propia apariencia, como hemos visto, revelaba ante su amiga. El efecto extraño e inmediato fue que, por así decirlo, Kate había sabido que necesitaba una coartada y que la había encontrado enseguida. La había elaborado hasta el final y había recorrido con ella el camino que le había trazado a Milly la tía Maud, hasta que, por decirlo de algún modo, había empezado a parecer gastada.

—Lo malo es que ella lo quiere, ¡Dios le perdone!, para mí y, desde tu llegada, todo se ha ido al traste porque él prefiere a otra, y esa otra eres tú.

Milly consiguió romper lo bastante el hechizo para mover la cabeza.

—Pues yo no me he dado cuenta. Y, si me tiene por una alternativa, más vale que se desengañe cuanto antes.

—¿De verdad, de verdad? ¿Siempre, siempre?

Milly intentó responder con el mismo desenfado.

—¿Quieres que te lo jure?

Kate pareció meditarlo, aunque sin duda también en broma.

—¿No hemos jurado ya suficiente?

—Tú tal vez, pero yo no, y debería corresponderte. Así que ahí va: de verdad, de verdad y siempre siempre, como tú dices. Ya ves que no soy un obstáculo.

—Gracias —dijo Kate—, pero no me sirve de nada.

—¡Oh!, lo digo sólo para simplificarle las cosas a él.

—La verdadera dificultad es que se trata de una persona de ideas muy variadas y resulta especialmente arduo irle con simplificaciones. Es, claro, justo lo que ha intentado hacer la tía Maud. Pero no acaba —prosiguió sin inmutarse Kate— de decidirse con respecto a mí.

—Bueno —sonrió Milly—, tú dale tiempo.

Su amiga le dio la réplica a la perfección.

—Es lo que hago, no hago otra cosa. Pero continúo siendo sólo una de sus muchas ideas.

—Si acabas siendo la elegida, no veo que eso tenga nada de malo —replicó Milly—. ¿Qué es un hombre, y más si es ambicioso —prosiguió—, si no tiene muchas ideas?

—Sin duda. Cuantas más, mejor. —Kate la miró majestuosa—. No tengo más remedio que esperar que me elija y no hacer nada para impedirlo.

Todo lo cual corroboró la impresión, imaginaria o no, de la coartada. Milly pensó que el espíritu osado e irónico que ocultaba, tan interesante en sí mismo, era su verdadero esplendor y grandeza. No menos interesante era el detalle, que no pasó por alto nuestra joven, de que Kate se ciñese sólo a las dificultades que le planteaba lord Mark, sin aludir a las que podían deberse a sus propias preferencias; y dicha circunstancia desempeñó, una vez más, su propio papel. Hacía lo que le venía en gana con respecto a otra persona, pero sin sentirse mínimamente obligada con la primera, y que insinuase que lord Mark era viejo y poco sincero no era más que un indicio de inseguridad en evidente consonancia con su implacable, pero no por eso menos digna, extravagancia. No quería dejar demasiado claro que estaba dispuesta a que mercadeasen con ella, pero eso no significaba que no deseara suficientemente que lo hiciesen. Había además algo que Milly encontró la ocasión de decir:

—Si, como dices, tu tía ha visto frustrados sus planes por mi culpa, mi impresión es que ha continuado siendo muy amable conmigo.

—¡Oh, porque, a pesar de lo sucedido, aún puedes serle muy útil! Más que frustrarla la has acicateado. No te has dado cuenta, pero la tienes agarrada a tus faldas. Puedes hacer lo que quieras, puedes hacer cosas que a nosotros nos resultan imposibles. Eres extranjera, independiente y estás sola; no estás odiosamente emparentada con multitud de gente. —Y, mientras Milly seguía boquiabierta, Kate continuó diciendo cosas de lo más extraordinario—: Nosotros a ti no te servimos de nada, y más vale que lo sepas cuanto antes. Otra cosa distinta es que tú puedas sernos de utilidad. Mi consejo —sin duda, estaba dispuesta a ir hasta el final — es que te olvides de nosotros mientras estés a tiempo. Enseguida comprenderías que es mucho mejor. No hemos hecho nada por ti que no pudieras haber conseguido con facilidad de otro modo. No nos debes nada. El año que viene no nos necesitarás; nosotros sí te seguiremos necesitando, pero ésa no es razón para que te quedes, y no tienes por qué pagar un precio tan espantoso porque la pobre señora Stringham te haya traído aquí. Tiene la mejor intención del mundo; está encantada con lo que ha hecho, pero no deberías permitir que escoja a tus amigos. Presenciarlo ha sido muy desagradable.

Milly intentó tomárselo a broma para no —era demasiado absurdo— asustarse. Sin duda era raro —o al menos poco natural— que, a última hora de la noche, en un hotel, en ausencia de Susie, le faltara la confianza en sí misma. Al día siguiente recordaría, entre otras cosas, que, al juntar todas las piezas al amanecer, había tenido la sensación de hallarse a solas con un animal que daba vueltas como una pantera. Era una imagen violenta, pero sirvió para que se sintiera menos avergonzada por haberse asustado. No obstante, a pesar de su temor, conservó la calma suficiente para encontrar una respuesta:

—Sin embargo, de no haber sido por Susie, no te habría conocido.

Fue entonces cuando Kate alcanzó el cénit de su inspiración.

—¡Oh, es posible que también acabes odiándome!

Eso ya fue demasiado, tal como le dio a entender Milly con su débil llama tras echarle una mirada sorprendida. No le importó, lo que ella quería era saber; y, aunque su voz hubiese adquirido un leve tono de solemne reproche y una tensión sombría, eso sería lo único que haría para servir a la señora Lowder.

—¿Por qué me dices estas cosas?

Inesperadamente, sus palabras tuvieron, gracias a un súbito cambio en la actitud de Kate, un efecto afortunado. Se había puesto en pie y Kate se plantó delante de ella brillando con un fulgor más atenuado. La pobre Milly pudo comprobar así por qué a menudo la gente, aunque torciera un poco el gesto, se dejaba conmover por ella.

—Porque eres una paloma.

Al mismo tiempo, la besó con delicadeza y consideración; no con familiaridad, como si se tomase una libertad, sino de manera casi ceremoniosa, al estilo de un *accolade*[30] y en parte, como si, aunque fuese una

paloma que podía posarse en un dedo, también fuera una princesa con la que hubiera que guardar las formas. Incluso notó, en el roce de los labios de su amiga, que esa forma, esa fría presión, sellaba el sentido de lo que acababa de decir Kate. Fue además una inspiración para la joven, que contuvo el aliento y aceptó, con alivio, aquel apelativo. Lo aceptó igual que habría aceptado una verdad revelada: iluminó la extraña oscuridad en la que se había movido en los últimos tiempos. Eso era lo que le ocurría. Era una paloma, ¿no? La palabra resonó en su interior justo en el instante en que oyó regresar a las dos amigas. La tía Maud no llevaba ni dos minutos en la sala cuando Milly comprendió, sin ningún lugar a dudas, que había subido con Susan —sin que hubiese verdadera necesidad a esas horas de la noche—, en lugar de esperar abajo a Kate, para, en cierto sentido, darle a entender que quería reanudar la conversación donde la habían dejado y que ya no tenía importancia. Había subido las escaleras para eso, y disfrutó de otro momento a solas con su joven anfitriona mientras Kate daba inusitadas oportunidades a Susan Shepherd. En otras palabras, se dedicaba a escuchar con mucha amabilidad, mientras la tía Maud hablaba con su amiga, las impresiones de la señora Stringham a propósito de la fiesta a la que acababan de asistir. La señora Lowder le expresó a Milly su esperanza de que todo hubiese ido bien en tono comprensivo y cariñoso, casi como una paloma arrullándole a otra. Lo de «todo» implicaba una generosa benevolencia que aliviaba y simplificaba las cosas; y lo dijo como si fuesen las dos jóvenes, no ella y su amiga, las que hubieran salido. Sin embargo, Milly había preparado su respuesta mientras la tía Maud subía por las escaleras; había sopesado a toda prisa las razones que la harían más parecida a una paloma; y respondió con tanta seriedad como candidez:

—No creo, mi querida señora, que él esté en Londres.

La larga mirada de profunda crítica que le dirigió la señora Lowder sin decir palabra le dio la justa medida del éxito que podría tener en su condición de paloma. Y, cuando habló, aún fue mejor.

—¡Ah, qué joven tan exquisita eres!

Tan deliciosa insinuación, casi sorprendente, aún impregnaba la sala como una fragancia dulzona cuando se marcharon. Una vez a solas con la señora Stringham, Milly siguió respirándola y volvió a comportarse como una paloma y animó a su amiga a darle un detallado informe sobre sus impresiones para que no le hiciese preguntas.

Ésta volvió a ser, con la llegada del nuevo día, su norma, aunque comprendiese que la necesidad de decidir en cada caso era una especie de complicación. Tendría que tener claro cuál sería el modo de actuar de una paloma. Esa mañana creyó haber resuelto la cuestión tras alterar sus planes para la visita de *sir* Luke Strett. La alegró pensar que había sabido exponerlos desde el principio en un tono más bien gris; y, aunque, después del desayuno, la señora Stringham empezó a considerarlos como una alfombra persa de valor incalculable que alguien hubiese desenrollado de pronto bajo sus pies, cinco minutos más tarde, no tuvo ningún escrúpulo en plegarse a seguir sus instrucciones.

—*Sir* Luke Strett ha quedado en venir a verme a las once, pero voy a salir a propósito. Quiero que le mientas y le digas que estoy en casa, y que, cuando suba, lo recibas en mi nombre. Lo preferirá. Así que sé amable con él.

Como es lógico hicieron falta más explicaciones y sobre todo la aclaración de que su visitante era el mejor médico de Londres; sin embargo, una vez le entregó la llave, la señora Stringham la guardó en su propio manojo, y su joven amiga notó cómo volvía a ponerse en marcha su imaginación. Funcionaba, de hecho, de forma muy parecida a la de la señora Lowder la noche anterior y volvió a cargar el ambiente con la extravagancia del consentimiento. La joven casi se asustó al comprobar cómo la gente se apresuraba a adelantarse a sus deseos: ¿tan poco tiempo le quedaba que había que allanarle siempre el camino? Era como si todos se apresuraran a ayudarla. Ciertamente Susie —no podía ni quería negarlo— habría podido tomarse la noticia como algo morboso; y, para ser justos con ella, era evidente que sentía lástima. Pero, aun así, el margen que siempre dejaba a su joven amiga seguía estando allí; y al oír su propuesta se comportó de manera ¿qué mejor palabra para definirlo que «bizantina»? En cuanto vio que Milly estaba convencida de lo decoroso del asunto reprimió su sorpresa y su desconcierto y sólo quiso conocer los hechos. Milly pudo responderle fácilmente como si sólo hubiese uno y pasó por alto todos los que la hacían sentirse amenazada. El hecho principal, en suma, era que le constaba que, más que ninguna otra cosa, él quería conocer, a solas, a alguien que se interesara por ella. Y ¿quién mejor que la leal Susan? La otra única circunstancia a la que creyó necesario aludir antes de despedirse fue que al principio había pensado pedirle guardar el secreto. Se había imaginado dulce y reservada. Pero había cambiado de opinión y el resultado era esa petición. No le dijo por qué había cambiado de idea, pero confiaba en la leal Susan. Su visitante también lo haría, y estaba segura de que a ella le parecería encantador. Además, no le diría —de eso la joven estaba convencida— nada demasiado espantoso. Lo peor sería que él se hubiese enamorado y necesitara una confidente que lo ayudase. Después, se encaminó hacia la National Gallery.

VII

Llevaba dándole vueltas a lo de la National Gallery desde que se enteró por *sir* Luke Strett de la hora a la que pensaba ir a visitarla. Imaginaba que era un sitio al que apenas iba nadie, uno de esos lugares que en Estados Unidos le parecían una de las principales atracciones de Europa y uno de los apoyos principales de la cultura, pero que —la historia de siempre— acabas sacrificando con típica frivolidad por otros placeres más vulgares. Había tenido, ya en aquellos caprichosos momentos en el Brünig, la sensación casi vergonzosa de estar dando la espalda a diversas oportunidades de ilustrarse que siempre había asociado a viajar por Europa, bajo el encabezamiento general de «pinturas y demás»; y por fin supo por qué lo había hecho. El alegato había sido muy claro: había preferido la vida al conocimiento, y el resultado era que la vida se desplegaba ante sus ojos. A pesar de las breves zambullidas e inmersiones en el colorido torrente de la historia para las que Kate Croy le había ayudado a encontrar tiempo, había desperdiciado grandes oportunidades, grandes momentos que, excepto ese día, no había sabido aprovechar. Pensó que todavía podría recuperar uno o dos entre los Ticianos y los Turners; llevaba tiempo esperando la ocasión, y, cuando se vio en las benévolas salas, comprendió que su fe estaba justificada. Era el ambiente que quería y el mundo que escogería; al ver cómo las salas silenciosas, nobles e imponentes, lujosas pero levemente veladas se abrían ante ella, exclamó: «¡Si pudiese perderme aquí…!». Había mucha gente, pero, admirablemente, ni una sola cuestión personal. Fuera las personas eran incontables, pero por suerte se habían quedado allí y hasta pasados quince minutos apenas volvió a vislumbrarlas hasta que se detuvo a observar un rato a una de las copistas. Había dos o tres en particular, absortas con sus anteojos y sus guardapolvos, que despertaron su simpatía hasta extremos casi absurdos, y parecieron mostrarle el mejor modo de vivir. Tendría que haber sido copista, en su caso era lo más apropiado. Lo que necesitaba era escapar, vivir debajo del agua, ser al mismo tiempo firme e impersonal. Lo tenía ante sus ojos, no había más que insistir una y otra vez.

Milly se dejó llevar por aquel hechizo hasta que casi se sintió avergonzada; estaba observando a las copistas y cayó de pronto en lo que podrían pensar de esa joven, de aspecto elegante, que las contemplaba como si fuesen el orgullo del museo. Le habría gustado hablar con ellas, entrar, por así decirlo, en su vida, y sólo se lo impidió el hecho de que temió despertar sus expectativas y no se imaginaba comprando imitaciones. En realidad no tardó en darse cuenta de que lo que la retenía era la sensación de hallarse en un refugio, de que, al fin y al cabo, había algo en su interior demasiado débil para los Turners y los Ticianos. Se daban la mano y formaban un círculo demasiado amplio que, no obstante, le habría gustado recorrer apenas un año antes. Pero estaban pensados para una vida más grandiosa, no para esa vida limitada cuyo centro era el interés y la compasión por los esfuerzos equivocados. Escogía absurdamente dónde se detenía y contemplaba, cada vez con menos curiosidad, las gloriosas paredes, sin perder de vista las perspectivas y los arcos de las puertas, para que no la sorprendieran de manera flagrante. De ese modo fue de sala en sala y, cuando se sentó a descansar, creyó haber visto ya la mayor parte de la colección. Había sillas desperdigadas desde donde se podían contemplar los cuadros. Milly, de hecho, reparó antes de nada en que, pese a todo, no habría sabido explicar ante un examinador el orden que seguían aquellas escuelas, y en segundo lugar en que estaba más cansada de lo que esperaba, a pesar de que no se había obligado a pensar demasiado. Deberíamos añadir que sus ojos encontraron también otra ocupación y ella no puso mayores impedimentos: se demoraron en su propia vaguedad y en la de otros visitantes; se fijaron en concreto, con distintos resultados, en el sorprendente desfile de sus compatriotas. Le sorprendió que esos peregrinos frecuentaran el gran museo a principios de agosto y también que fuese capaz de reconocerlos a todos desde lejos, de identificarlos con facilidad y de reparar en que arrojaban nuevas luces sobre su propia oscuridad. Al final se resignó y fue una conclusión como cualquier otra: ese día habría ido a observar a las copistas y a contar las Baedekers[31]. Tal vez fuese la moraleja de estar delicada de salud: que acababas sentada en un

sitio público contando norteamericanos. Servía para pasar el tiempo, pero parecía ya una segunda línea de defensa, a pesar del inconfundible patrón por el que estaban cortados sus compatriotas. Era como si estuviesen cortados a tijera, coloreados, etiquetados y cosidos pero no acabara de establecer relación con ellos: en cierto modo no le decían nada. En parte, no hay duda de que ni siquiera la reconocían o sabían de su existencia, ni tan sólo reconocían su fracaso compartido, el indicio de que para ella Europa también era «ardua». Comprendió así —pues aún conservaba el sentido del humor— que no tenía tanto éxito con ellos como con los habitantes de Londres que apenas la conocían. Se preguntó si sería diferente si volviese con ese encanto añadido; y también, ya puestos, si volvería alguna vez. Sus amigos pasaban de largo, en cualquier caso, con toda la viveza de su falta de crítica, e incluso le dio la sensación de estar aprovechándose de una ventaja mezquina.

Hubo un momento más interesante, no obstante, en el que tres señoras, sin duda madre e hijas, se detuvieron delante de ella obligadas por un comentario hecho al parecer por una de ellas a propósito de un objeto al otro lado de la sala. Milly se hallaba de espaldas a dicho objeto, pero de frente a su joven compatriota, la que acababa de hablar y en cuya mirada percibió cierto brillo de reconocimiento. Un reconocimiento que, por su parte, también se distinguía en sus propios ojos: reconoció a las tres, genéricamente, con la misma facilidad con que un escolar con una chuleta en el regazo sabría la respuesta en clase; se sintió, igual que el colegial, bastante culpable, y se preguntó si era honorable arrogarse el derecho de poseer y desposeer a gente que no le había hecho nada. Si el lugar se hubiese prestado un poco más, habría sido capaz de decir dónde y cómo vivían; se inclinó en su imaginación sobre el señor Fulano, paternal y marital en su casa, constantemente citado con todos los honores y respetos, pero también desapercibido y convertido en una simple abstracción financiera. La madre, cuyo cabello blanco cardado y bien peinado no parecía guardar relación alguna con su edad aparente, tenía el rostro casi químicamente limpio y seco; sus acompañantes desprendían un vago resentimiento humanizado por el cansancio; y las tres llevaban abrigos rematados por una pequeña capucha de cuadros. La tela parecía distinta, pero curiosamente los abrigos eran idénticos.

—¿Interesante? Bueno, si a ti te lo parece. —Era la madre la que había hablado y quien añadió, después de una pausa en la que Milly pensó que debía de referirse a un cuadro—: «Al estilo inglés».

Los tres pares de ojos convergieron, y sus dueñas observaron esa característica sin hacer más comentarios, aunque con cierta melancolía muda por parte de una de las hijas y susurrada por parte de la otra. Milly se sintió unida a ellas cuando se marcharon; se dijo que tendrían que haberla conocido, que había algo que podrían haber compartido. Pero ella también las había perdido. Eran frías; la dejaron con la vaga duda de qué sería lo que habían visto. Lo de «interesante» la animó a volverse casi tanto como la posibilidad de que el «estilo inglés» se refiriese a la escuela inglesa que era de sus favoritas; pero reparó, antes de moverse, por los cuadros que tenía delante, en que en realidad se hallaba entre pequeñas escenas domésticas holandesas. El efecto volvió a ser apreciable y despertó la vaga sospecha de que, al fin y al cabo, no era un cuadro lo que había despertado el interés de las tres damas. En cualquier caso, ya era hora de marcharse, y se puso en pie al tiempo que se daba la vuelta. Detrás de ella estaba una de las entradas y acababan de llegar varios visitantes, solos y por parejas, y sus ojos se fijaron de pronto en uno de ellos.

Era un caballero que se hallaba en mitad de la sala, un caballero que se había quitado el sombrero y que, mientras contemplaba con aire ausente —o eso le pareció a Milly— los cuadros de arriba, se secaba la frente con el pañuelo.

Esa ocupación lo entretuvo el tiempo suficiente para que Milly comprendiera —y le bastó con unos segundos— que era su rostro lo que habían estado observando las tres damas. La única razón debió ser que coincidió con ellas, aunque con reservas, en lo merecido de sus palabras; y no había duda de que «el estilo inglés» —tal vez por un instantáneo contraste con el norteamericano— tenía cierto poder cautivador. Este poder cautivador, y eso fue lo más sorprendente, se agudizó de pronto hasta volverse casi doloroso, pues mientras observaba desde la distancia la cabeza descubierta, se estremeció al reconocerla. Era la de Merton Densher, que siguió allí el tiempo suficiente para que ella lo viera y luego dudase. Todo ocurrió muy deprisa, pero aun así tuvo tiempo de preguntarse si convendría dejar que la viese; pudo responderse que no le gustaría que la sorprendiera intentando evitarlo e incluso habría podido decidir que estaba demasiado absorto para ver nada si no se hubiese producido una impresión que superó en violencia a la primera. Después fue incapaz de decir cuánto tiempo llevaba mirándolo cuando reparó en que a ella también la estaban observando; lo único que acertó a comprender fue que, aunque él siguió sin verla, ella reconoció a otra persona. La causa de esta segunda sorpresa fue nada menos que Kate Croy, que apareció de pronto en su campo de visión y cuyos ojos se encontraron con los suyos en el siguiente movimiento. Kate se hallaba a apenas dos metros de distancia, el señor Densher no estaba solo. El rostro de Kate lo decía de manera

taxativa, así que, después de mirarla de forma tan fija e inexpresiva como Milly, esbozó una remota sonrisa. De este modo tan extraordinario —sumado a lo sorprendente de su encuentro— redujo Kate tácitamente en un instante a términos sencillos la presencia de ambas en aquel lugar. Puede que la joven no entendiera hasta después la relación entre ese detalle y su firme convicción de que Kate era una persona prodigiosa; pero, hasta cierto punto, supo que la estaban manejando y, de nuevo, igual que la noche anterior, tuvo la sensación de que disponían de ella por completo con el fin de procurar su bienestar. No pasó, en suma, ni un minuto antes de que Kate se las arreglara para que todo pareciera de lo más natural. El hechizo radicaba precisamente en su provisionalidad, y en que había adquirido ese carácter de un momento para otro; representaba por suerte muchas cosas que Kate le explicaría en cuanto tuviera ocasión. Dejaba además —y eso era lo más sorprendente— un amplio margen para reírse del modo en que ocurrían las cosas, de la increíble casualidad de encontrarse en semejante lugar, justo después de haberse despedido sin hacer la menor alusión a la visita al museo. La joven guapa había tomado literalmente las riendas del asunto cuando Merton Densher pudo exclamar visiblemente sonrojado o abochornado, pues no es fácil distinguir la alegría de la vergüenza: «¡Caramba, pero si es la señorita Theale, quién lo iba a imaginar!», y: «Pero, señorita Theale, ¡menuda coincidencia!».

La señorita Theale tuvo entretanto la sensación de que para él también había, por parte de Kate, algo determinante, tácito y maravilloso; aunque ni su amiga lo miró para sugerirle nada ni él la miró a ella para preguntarle. Había mirado y seguía mirando sólo a Milly, con amabilidad y consideración —ella no habría sabido cómo llamarlo—, pero sin que disminuyera por eso su impresión de que las mujeres saben salir mejor de un aprieto que los hombres. El aprieto, claro, no podía definirse ni expresarse con palabras y el modo en que evitaron hacer ningún comentario le pareció un triunfo típico del estado de civilización; aunque lo aceptó insistentemente con una íntima llamarada de pasión, porque lo menos que se le ocurría hacer por él era manifestarle su intención de facilitarle las cosas. Cansada y nerviosa como estaba, se habría desconcertado mucho más si no la hubiese salvado la oportunidad misma. Fue lo que más la ayudó, lo que hizo que fuese, pasados los primeros segundos, casi tan valiente con Kate como Kate con ella, y se preguntara qué podría querer su amigo. Que al cabo de tres minutos, sin una sola alusión embarazosa, se hubiese convertido en «su» amigo era el efecto evidente de la forma tan sublime y civilizada en que se comportaron. La rapidez con la que él se hizo cargo de la situación fue muy inspiradora para Milly, hasta el punto de que se esforzó por destacar en ese plano. Sin duda hicieron falta grandes dosis de inspiración para disimular lo ridículo —o al menos incómodo— de la anomalía, para Kate, de que Milly conociera a su caballero y, para ella misma, de que Kate estuviese pasando la mañana con él, pero todo siguió en el mismo tono después de que Milly probase el primer sorbo. Después se preguntaría qué era lo que se habían dicho en realidad, ya que habían salido tan airosos con lo que habían callado; aunque en aquel momento la dulzura del sorbo consistió en saber que el éxito estaba garantizado. Lo que pudiera estar en juego para el señor Densher era un misterio, y es posible que ella inventase su propia necesidad para facilitar las cosas. Sea como fuere, los modales refinados de todos ellos los ayudaron a salir del paso. Podemos añadir que en lo que Milly demostró estar más inspirada fue en su rápida comprensión de que lo que le sería más útil era, por así decirlo, su propia naturalidad. Hacía tiempo que era consciente, con cierta vergüenza, de su falta de entusiasmo, o al menos de su escasa rentabilidad, del amplio margen que desaprovechaba de su condición de norteamericana, casi como, si en el aire inglés, el texto pudiera llenar toda la página. Todavía le quedaban reservas de espontaneidad, si no de comicidad; así que pudo utilizar el capital que tenía disponible. Fue lo más espontanea que pudo y tan norteamericana como el señor Densher podía imaginar después de sus viajes. Habló con frivolidad, pero se congratuló de hacerlo sin emoción, al estilo neoyorquino. Este estilo vetaba elegantemente la emoción, y Milly intuyó que podía serle útil.

Antes de que salieran del museo quedó claro su acierto, pues, cuando sus amigos aceptaron su invitación a almorzar con ella en el hotel, fue como si la comida los estuviese aguardando en la Quinta Avenida. Kate nunca había estado, pero Milly la llevaría; y, aunque el señor Densher sí había ido, nunca había tenido que ir tan deprisa. Lo propuso como si fuese lo más natural del mundo, igual que habría hecho una joven norteamericana, y enseguida pudo comprobar su acierto por la rapidez con que aceptaron. Lo mejor fue que le bastó con fingir que lo hacía a sugerencia de Kate. Su primera sonrisa había dicho: «Sí, ya sé que parece raro… pero dame tiempo», y la joven norteamericana sabía esperar mejor que nadie. Les dio tiempo de sobra y ellos tuvieron que aceptarlo, aunque sospechasen que era más del que necesitaban. En el pórtico del museo dijo preferir un coche de punto, precisamente para multiplicar los minutos que duraría el viaje. Y el encanto que su espíritu supo prestar al uso de aquel vehículo justificó de sobra su elección —al menos para ella— cuando llevó a sus amigos en presencia de Susie. Susie aguardaba su almuerzo y su regreso y nada podría haber colmado más la conciencia de Milly que demostrarle a su buena amiga lo poco preocupada

que estaba. La copa que le ofrecía era sin duda un tanto sorprendente, pues estaba llena de una extraña mezcla de líquidos. Milly notó que Susie la miraba como preguntándose si habría llevado a esos invitados para que oyesen el informe de *sir* Luke Strett. En fin, mejor que su amiga tuviese muchas preguntas que hacerse y no demasiado pocas; al fin y al cabo, como decían en Estados Unidos, había ido para interesarse, y era evidente que estaba interesada. Milly sintió, no obstante, en el punto culminante de la crisis, cierta lástima por ella, pues difícilmente podría extraer un secreto consuelo de aquella extraña escena. Estaba viendo aparecer de pronto al señor Densher, pero ignoraba qué otras cosas habían sucedido. Del mismo modo vio que Kate parecía indiferente ante el destino de su amiga, y no encontraba ninguna explicación posible. Lo único que la ayudó a conservar la paciencia fue la manera en que, después de almorzar, la joven casi se esforzó en ganarse su favor. También ayudó a Milly. De hecho, fue un cambio de actitud tan notorio por parte de la joven guapa que Milly vio en ello cierta belleza. A la joven guapa Susie siempre le había parecido una pesada y aquel cambio era muy llamativo. Las dos se quedaron, después de comer, en la salita donde habían comido y dejaron que el otro invitado y su anfitriona pasaran a la habitación contigua. Eso fue lo que más le gustó, era como si Kate le estuviera pidiendo ayuda. Si de verdad prefería quedarse con Susan Shepherd a ir con su amigo, eso explicaba muchas cosas. Tal vez no exactamente por qué había salido con él esa mañana, pero sí todo lo que podía decir en su presencia.

Poco a poco, ante la viveza del proceder de Kate, las distintas posibilidades fueron encajando. Merton Densher estaba enamorado y Kate no podía hacer nada para evitarlo, sólo compadecerle y ser amable con él: ¿no lo explicaba eso todo, sin necesidad de grandes aspavientos? Milly, en cualquier caso, hizo como si así fuese, se sirvió de esta hipótesis como si fuera una manta y tiró de ella con fuerza para taparse hasta la barbilla. Si no era suficiente, al menos serviría hasta que ella pudiera añadir el resto. Y lo hizo interesándose por la importante cuestión de si, al volver a verlo, después de, como ella decía, tantas idas y venidas, su impresión era diferente de la que le había producido en Nueva York. Lo pensó al salir del museo y continuó dándole vueltas en el coche y en el almuerzo; y, ahora que llevaba un cuarto de hora con él a solas, la pregunta se volvió más acuciante. En aquel momento crítico comprendió que no llegaría a ninguna conclusión clara y directa y que la pregunta acabaría deshaciéndose entre sus dedos. No sabía decir si era distinto o no, y tampoco sabía, ni le importaba, si lo era ella: todo eso había dejado de tener importancia a la luz de lo único que sabía. Sabía que le gustaba, como se dijo para sus adentros, tanto como antes; y, si eso equivalía a que le gustase una persona nueva, tanto mejor. Al principio le pareció muy reservado, aun después de recuperarse de la confusión inicial; pero pronto comprendió que esa leve perplejidad no se debía a nada tan vago como su reinstaurada identidad, pues en su país debía de haber visto a miles de jóvenes como ella. No, estuvo callado, inevitablemente, porque la propia actitud de Milly —tan espontánea— hizo que todo pareciese relativo; y también porque, aunque Kate también procuró ser espontánea, se notaba en el aire que debían comportarse con normalidad.

Después, cuando todos se acostumbraron, por así decirlo, a la felicidad ajena, el joven empezó a hablar con más claridad, después de decidir cuál sería su propia actitud. Consistió en suponer que ella querría tener noticias de los Estados Unidos y en contarle por orden todo lo que había visto y hecho allí. De pronto se volvió locuaz, casi pesado; y, después de varias pausas, volvió a la carga una y otra vez; el efecto fue tal vez tanto más extraño porque no le dio a entender lo que había admirado y lo que no. Se limitó a detallarle su vida social, sobre todo en ese rato en que estuvieron solos. Ella había dejado de ser norteamericana: todo con tal de dejarle ser inglés, una concesión de la que Milly notó que el señor Densher sacaba ventajas tan inmensas como inconscientes. A Milly nunca le había interesado menos Estados Unidos que en ese momento, pero eso no tenía nada que ver. Habría sido la ocasión de su vida de aprender sobre ellos, pues no había manera de hacerle callar y ni una sola vez preguntó por ella. Casi fue como si supiese que la mayor de sus aventuras era la que estaba viviendo ahora.

En este punto aquella cuestión tan importante terminó de deshacerse entre sus dedos y Milly comprendió que lo único que le incumbía era la sensación de estar allí con él. Y no la detuvo comprender también que, cualesquiera que fuesen sus motivos al principio, ahora actuaba movido por el deseo concreto, decidido bien por hechos nuevos o por nuevos caprichos, de ser, como todos los demás, amable con ella. Había empezado a comportarse igual que ellos; y tal vez se hubiese exaltado tanto porque le había parecido el remedio para cualquier situación incómoda. Hiciera lo que hiciese, Milly sabía que él seguiría gustándole, no había otra alternativa; pero se desanimó un poco al comprobar que la veía igual que todos. Había soñado con que no la viera así, con que la viese de manera más personal o incluso con que no la viese de ninguna forma; pero podía hacer lo que quisiera pues, al fin y al cabo, su manera de verla no sería un obstáculo para que ella lo viera a él. Lo malo era, en general —si se le permitía hacer una crítica muy poco generosa—, que esa universalidad edulcorada volvía prosaica y previsible cualquier relación, pues

anticipaba y se imponía a la —no menos edulcorada— actuación de las verdaderas afinidades. Eso era sin duda lo más destacable de su capacidad para retenerlo… eso y la cristalina atención con que escuchaba su amable descripción del paisaje en las Rocosas. En realidad Milly estaba comparando su habilidad para retenerlo con la de Kate para retener a Susan. Si de ella dependía, no sería el señor Densher el primero en escapar. Ésta al menos era una de las formas que adoptaba la tensión interna de la joven; pero, por debajo de tan profunda razón, había un motivo aún más sutil. Lo que había dejado en el hotel cuando salió por la mañana a probar suerte seguía aún allí, pero si cabe más activo y agudizado. Lo que había dominado su espíritu, que ella había reprimido con tanto esfuerzo, estaba volviendo a aparecer. En cuanto se marchasen sus amigos, Susie estallaría, y no —por muy interesada que se hubiese mostrado en más de una ocasión por dicho caballero— a propósito del señor Densher. Durante el almuerzo Milly había notado en su semblante un brillo febril que resultaba muy elocuente. En ese momento no le preocupaba el señor Densher, que había encontrado ocupado el hueco que le reservaba en su imaginación. El señor Densher, por lo que a ella se refería, no era relevante, y su amiga lo notó. Eso sólo podía querer decir que únicamente pensaba en *sir* Luke Strett y en lo que le había dicho. ¿Qué le había dicho? Sin duda empezaba a estar claro que Milly haría bien averiguándolo, aunque el brillo en el rostro de Susie no podía ser más revelador. Y, como lo único que separaba a la joven anfitriona del señor Densher de recibir esas noticias era ese fino tabique, Milly siguió aferrándose a las montañas Rocosas.

Volumen II

Libro VI

I

—Caramba, Kate, ¡sí que te has quedado rato! —fue la puntual observación de Merton Densher a propósito de su aventura, después de que, por así decirlo, salieran bien librados de ella; una observación que, por su parte, Kate respondió con no menos presteza, para darle a entender que se lo perdonaba sólo porque era un hombre. Tenía que reconocer, por más que le decepcionara, que era lo más útil que podía ser en calidad de tal. La realidad de la aventura era evidente para ambos; se habían mirado al llegar a la calle como quien acaba de sortear un obstáculo peligroso y había ya demasiada unanimidad entre los dos para que él pudiera llamarse a engaño respecto a su actitud. Pero ¡qué explícita había que ser con los hombres! Kate podría haber hablado largo y tendido sobre eso. No obstante, después de pensarlo, a Densher le pareció evidente que para la joven, ahora que se habían visto y habían pasado media mañana juntos, lo más importante era que tratasen cuanto antes la cuestión de su futuro inmediato. Que tendrían que tratarla, y que tendrían que lidiar hábilmente con dificultades y retrasos, era la gran cuestión con la que se había encontrado al volver, más que ninguna otra, excepto la conciencia renovada de que se necesitaban el uno al otro. Habían bastado veinte minutos la tarde anterior para comprobarlo, y ese tiempo quedó plenamente justificado por el encanto de la demostración. Había llegado a Euston[32] a las cinco, tras enviarle un telegrama desde Liverpool nada más desembarcar, y ella había decidido ir a recibirle a la estación, por público que pudiera ser un acto semejante. Después de que, tras apearse del tren, él la felicitara por su valentía, Kate había respondido con franqueza que esas cosas había que hacerlas sin pensar. Ese día no le importaba quién pudiera verla y aprovechó para disfrutar de la ocasión. Al día siguiente, inevitablemente, dispondría de tiempo para reflexionar y luego, no menos inevitablemente, se convertiría en una criatura más vil, una criatura cauta y precavida. No obstante, acordó su próxima cita para el día siguiente a primera hora, pues tuvo en cuenta su presente obligación de volver a Lancaster Gate a las seis en punto. Le había explicado, entre imprecaciones, sus motivos —que siempre había gente invitada a tomar el té y que se lo había prometido a la tía Maud—, pero había tenido la generosidad de sugerir una visita matutina a la National Gallery, como si hubiese madurado la idea mientras lo esperaba. Allí también podrían verlos, pero nadie los conocería; igual que en el bar de la estación al que habían ido, donde, en el peor de los casos, sólo llamarían la atención de desconocidos. Tomarían alguna cosa ya que estaban allí. Así fue como volvieron a reparar en que no tenían adónde ir.

Volvía a hallarse en suelo inglés con todo tipo de sentimientos, pero no estaba preparado para que uno de los más intensos fuese el pesar que le causaría esa dificultad. Después fue consciente de que su impaciencia le había hecho eludir ciertas cuestiones; y lo desanimó que, por falta de previsión y de aplomo no tuviera dónde llevar a la joven de la que estaba enamorado. Así que la había llevado a la estación de Euston y —por sugerencia de la propia Kate— al sitio donde la gente tomaba cerveza y bollos y había pedido que les sirvieran un té en una mesita del rincón; lo cual sin duda, ya que estaban perdidos entre la multitud, no estaba mal como medida momentánea. Tal vez tanto como llevarla en coche hasta la puerta de su propia casa, el único recurso que se le ocurrió. Aunque dicho recurso se frustró, cuando previó que una vez allí, no acabarían de decidirse. Ella tendría que parar, no entraría con él, no podría, y él no debería poder pedírselo, pues le resultaría imposible sin revelar una deficiencia en lo que podría llamarse, incluso en esa fase tan avanzada, el respeto que sentía por ella: una vez más, eso fue lo único que quedó claro, aparte de que resultaba desquiciante. Comprimida y concentrada, reducida a una o dos punzadas agudas, pero aun así aguardándole en el andén de la estación de Euston alzando la cabeza como una serpiente en el jardín, estaba la desconcertante sensación de que en cierto modo el respeto en aquel juego parecía —no sabía cómo llamarlo— una quinta rueda para un carruaje. Tendría que ser algo interior, no exterior, algo para aumentar el amor, no para disminuir la felicidad. Habían vuelto a verse para ser felices, y tuvo la clara sensación, en uno o dos de sus momentos más lúcidos, de que debía tener cuidado con todo lo que pudiese

amenazar esa bendición. Si Kate hubiese aceptado ir con él y apearse en su casa habrían ocurrido muchas cosas al pie de las escaleras, uno de esos extraños momentos entre un hombre y una mujer que avivan la chispa del conflicto siempre latente en las profundidades de la pasión. Ella habría negado con la cabeza —con una gracia triste y sublime— al ir a entrar; y, aunque él habría aceptado su negativa, habría notado que sus ojos se hundían en los de ella más de lo que podría hacerlo ninguna palabra en una situación así. Eso habría equivalido a la sospecha, al temor a la sombra de una voluntad adversa. Así que fue una suerte que esos escasos minutos fuesen por otros derroteros y que en la media hora que, a pesar de todo, se las arregló para pasar con él, Kate demostrase a la perfección que sabía manejar cosas tan desquiciantes. Pareció pedirle e implorarle que, por su propio bien, permitiese que, a partir de entonces, lo hiciera a su manera.

Lo había hecho ya al proponer enseguida, para verse cuanto antes, uno de los grandes museos; y con tanta maña además que él no comprendió del todo hasta que se despidieron la situación en que lo había puesto. Su separación de tantas semanas había causado tal efecto en él que sus exigencias, sus deseos, habían aumentado; y ya la noche antes, mientras el vapor navegaba bajo las estrellas del verano a la vista de la costa irlandesa, había notado toda la fuerza de su necesidad particular. En otras palabras, no había dudado ni un minuto que el motivo de su viaje fuese decirle que tenían que poner fin a su error. Su error era haber creído que podrían resistir, no a la tía Maud, sino una impaciencia que, prolongada y exasperada, haría enfermar a cualquiera. Supo más que nunca, al despedirse en el vestíbulo de la estación, lo enfermo que podía sentirse un hombre, e incluso una mujer, por esa razón; aunque también creyó saber que ya había dejado que Kate empezara a aplicar antídotos, medicinas y sedantes suaves. Sonaba vulgar, como en general, en el amor, los nombres de las cosas: los términos de las relaciones, comparados con el amor en sí mismo, suenan horriblemente vulgares; pero le pareció que, al fin y al cabo, tal vez hubiera vuelto para verse rechazado aunque, claro, aún tardaría un par de días en comprobarlo. Sus cartas desde Estados Unidos habían gustado, aunque no tanto como él habría querido, y esperaba cobrar lo convenido y disponer de dinero. En realidad no era demasiado, no regresaba ni mucho menos libreta de cheques en mano, así que no podía alegar ese nuevo motivo para hacer entrar en razón a su amante. La certeza ideal habría sido poder ofrecerle un cambio de perspectivas como garantía para el cambio de filosofía, y sin él tendría que contentarse con el pretexto del tiempo transcurrido. El tiempo transcurrido —no tantas semanas después de todo, podría por supuesto decir ella— tenía por fuerza que haber hecho algo por él; y esa consideración era lo que le había mantenido a flote, tanto más porque veía lo que el tiempo transcurrido había hecho personalmente por Kate. Lo había visto con tanta claridad que casi le había asustado, incluso en aquel rinconcito del bar de la estación de Euston, y casi le había asustado porque parecía proclamar que seguir esperando era un juego de tontos. Kate no había vuelto a ser como al principio; y él no había vuelto a sentirse tan seguro y convencido. Estaba ante sus ojos, pulsando su orgullo de posesión igual que un ejecutante oculto en una iglesia oscura y gigantesca podría tocar el órgano. Su sensación final fue que una mujer así no podía pedirle lo imposible.

Volvió a verla a la mañana siguiente; y de momento pudieron flotar en la pura dicha de estar juntos, juntos en la medida en que su presencia en un museo de pintura lo permitía. Esa intimidad improvisada resultó ser en realidad, a juzgar por decenas de síntomas de inquietud incluso por parte de Kate, insuficiente; pues un sitio tan interesante no pudo despertar en ellos ni siquiera un mínimo de interés. Habían quedado allí para no verse por la calle y para no volver a ir, con idéntica falta de estilo e inventiva, a una estación de ferrocarril; ni tampoco a Kensington Gardens, que, ambos coincidieron tácitamente enseguida, tendría el regusto de sus antiguas frustraciones. El regusto presente, el de esa mañana en el museo de pintura, había sido distinto; sin embargo Densher, al cabo de un cuarto de hora, había sabido a la perfección a qué atenerse. Eso le consoló de tanto fastidio, igual que si hubiese visto cómo le afectaba a ella el cambio. Podía ser tan noble y generosa como quisiera y él no había conocido en Estados Unidos a nadie que pudiera compararse con Kate, pero Kate no podía fingir, en tales condiciones, creer que él se contentaría con eso. Ni que él lo creería suficiente para que se contentara ella. No lo era, fue como si ella misma se lo diese a entender. Esto es lo que a él le habría gustado poder demostrarle. Si hubiese podido expresarlo con crudeza le habría dicho allí mismo: «Oye, ¿debo entender que crees que podemos seguir así?». Claro que ella habría podido contestar que volver a estar con él, atesorarlo, en silencio, aferrarse a él, igual que en la época que habían pasado separados, era algo sobre lo que no debían discutir; pero sería sólo un simple gesto elegante, un sencillo alarde de sutileza. Sabía tan bien como él lo que querían; a pesar de lo cual él no habría sabido decir si podría no haberlo sacado a colación de no haber enturbiado ella su acuerdo en un momento determinado. Poco después se habían sentado a hablar en tono íntimo y superficial. Eran muchas las cosas urgentes que tenían que decirse, pues no las habían agotado todas en la estación de Euston. Se extendieron sobre ellas cuanto quisieron y Kate pareció dejar de temer —lo cual la favorecía

mucho— posibles sorpresas. Después él intentaría, en vano, recordar cuáles de sus propias palabras y silencios, cuál de sus miradas, o qué roce accidental de la mano había precipitado, en mitad de todo aquello, un impulso súbito y diferente en Kate. Se había levantado, sin razón aparente, como para quebrar el hechizo, aunque en ese momento Densher no supo qué había hecho él para que el hechizo resultara peligroso. Kate lo solventó con bastante desenvoltura un minuto después con una extraña observación a propósito de un cuadro a la que él ni siquiera respondió; y con independencia de eso se quejó de lo horriblemente agobiantes que eran esas salas. Añadió que sería mejor salir a respirar, y fue como si su conciencia común, mientras pasaban a otra sala, fuera como la de esas personas que llevan juntas mucho tiempo e intentan aparentar naturalidad después de un sobresalto. Probablemente mientras estaban así ocupados —reconsideró luego el joven— fue cuando se toparon con su pequeña amiga neoyorquina. Por alguna razón Densher pensaba que era pequeña, aunque era más o menos de la misma talla que Kate, a quien, excepto en algún momento de cariño con su amada, nunca había aplicado el diminutivo.

Lo que recordaría con mayor claridad al hacer memoria sería el proceso por el que había reparado en que Kate conocía a Milly Theale mejor de lo que había supuesto. Le había escrito en su momento para contarle que tenía una nueva amiga muy divertida, y él había respondido que la había conocido allí y que le había parecido muy simpática; a lo cual ella había contestado que tendría que averiguar algo más cuando volviese a Inglaterra. Kate, no obstante, no había vuelto a hablar de la joven y él había estado demasiado ocupado con otras cosas. La historia personal de la pequeña Milly Theale no era de interés para su periódico; y además estaba viendo muchas señoritas Theale. Incluso llegaron a convertirse en uno de los fenómenos sociales que encajaban en el proyecto de sus cartas públicas. Para este grupo en especial —las jóvenes irresistibles, supereminentes— tal vez se reservara lo mejor de su pluma. Así fue como pudo volver a tener en Londres, una hora o dos después de su almuerzo con las dos norteamericanas, una impresión para la que Kate no lo había preparado del todo. Posiblemente reparase también en su renovada idea de que eran justo preparativos, de varios tipos, lo que, tanto ese día como el anterior, se traía entre manos Kate. De hecho, si se paraba a pensarlo, despertaba sus aprensiones al punto de obligarle a quitárselas de la cabeza. Descartó la sospecha hasta cierto punto, al despedirse primero de sus anfitrionas y luego de Kate, con un paseo largo y sin rumbo. Después tenía que ir a la oficina, pero disponía de dos o tres horas y aprovechó el pretexto de que había comido más de la cuenta. Después de que Kate le pidiera que le llamase un cabriolé —algo que él se sorprendió reprobando, como política anunciada y repetida por parte de ella— se quedó un rato en una esquina y contempló vagamente su ciudad. Sin duda, siempre hay un momento para el ausente que regresa, el momento en que vuelve a sentir la primera emoción, tras el que no le queda la menor duda de que ha vuelto. El paréntesis estaba cerrado, y una vez más Densher era sólo una frase, por así decirlo, en el texto general, el texto que, desde la esquina donde se había parado momentáneamente, parecía una enorme página gris impresa que conseguía ser densa sin ser hermosa. El gris, no obstante, era más o menos el contorno borroso de un punto de vista no del todo recuperado; y habría más colores. Había vuelto, lisa y llanamente, pero había vuelto a determinadas posibilidades y perspectivas y el terreno que abarcaba de manera más bien miope era el acto de una posesión renovada.

Anduvo hacia el norte sin rumbo fijo, más o menos en la misma dirección, sin sospecharlo, que su pequeña amiga neoyorquina había seguido, uno o dos días antes, en su inquieto paseo. Llegó, como Milly, a Regent's
Park; y aunque llegó más deprisa y anduvo a paso más vivo, se sentó por fin, como Milly, a meditar. Ante él también en esa situación, podemos añadir —y es posible que ocupase el mismo banco—, desplegaban sus alas varias preocupantes fantasías. Aún no había dicho lo que quería más allá de hasta donde Kate le había dado ocasión. Tendría ocasión en los próximos días. En la práctica no la había apremiado con lo que más les afectaba; esas primeras horas sólo había parecido que les afectara estar, espiritualmente hablando, juntos. Eso en cualquier caso era palpable, que eran más y no menos las cosas que había entre los dos. La explicación sobre las dos damas sería parte del lote, pero podía esperar junto con todo lo demás. Sin duda lo que más le había empujado a andar no había sido la falta de aclaraciones. Sino lo que ella había dicho tantas veces antes, y siempre con el efecto de una súbita ruptura: «Y ahora ten la bondad de buscarme un buen cabriolé». Sus encuentros previos, las ocasiones en que habían llegado paseando al extremo sur del parque, también se habían interrumpido con peculiar irrelevancia. Era de hecho lo que más los separaba, pues él habría podido, de no haber sido por las razones que esgrimía Kate, haber subido al coche con ella. ¿Qué pensaba que quería hacer?, le había preguntado a menudo. No obstante, era sin duda una cuestión trivial, ya que, puestos a eso, no dependían de un cabriolé —bueno o malo— para sentirse unidos: le importaba menos por la pérdida particular que por ser una especie de irritante prueba de sus mañas. Esas mañas, en forma de prudencia, habían sido notables desde el principio, cuando se trataba de verse con él; y

su único reproche era que lo hubiesen sido aún más, también desde el principio, cuando se trataba de despedirse. Esa tarde volvió a plantearle la pregunta, cuando se repitió la petición: le preguntó qué pensaba que quería hacer. Recordó, en su banco de
Regent's
Park, la libertad fantasiosa, divertida y encantadora con que había respondido; recordó el momento, mientras aguardaban al acostumbrado cabriolé, en que, decepcionado como estaba, no pudo sino sonreírse ante la superioridad del humor de Kate, con su alegría y elegancia, respecto al famoso y solemne humor norteamericano. En cualquier caso habían acordado ya su nueva cita, y él tendría ocasión de apreciar que el sitio que ella había elegido —una sorpresa además de un alivio— simplificaría mucho las cosas. Sería una ayuda o un obstáculo, pero al menos no tendrían que verse por la calle. Y cuando Kate anunció ese privilegio él le preguntó, como es lógico, si la señora Lowder estaba enterada de su regreso.

—No por mí —había respondió Kate—. Pero hablaré con ella. —Y arguyó, como con una visión fresca y renovada, que a partir de entonces sería más fácil—. Llevamos meses comportándonos con tanta corrección que sin duda tengo margen para nombrarte. Irás a visitarla y te dejará a solas conmigo; te demostrará su buen natural y que no teme que la traiciones. Nunca has roto con ella, más bien al contrario, y te aprecia tanto como siempre. Nos vamos de la ciudad, será el final; así que no hay nada que preguntar. Se lo preguntaré esta noche —concluyó Kate—, y, si lo dejas en mis manos, me aseguraré de que todo vaya bien: mi inteligencia, te lo aseguro, se ha vuelto diabólica.

Por supuesto, lo había dejado en sus manos y estaba más intrigado entonces que en Brook Street[33]. Se repitió que si no les ayudaba a triunfar complicaría las cosas. Sin duda eso era una parte de su perplejidad ante otras cuestiones. Kate se había ido sin aceptar su pequeño desafío sobre las condiciones de su amistad con la querida Milly. Su querida Milly, era razonable, formaba en cierto modo parte del cuadro. Su querida Milly, que había aparecido en su ausencia, ocupaba —no habría sabido decir por qué lo intuía— una posición más central de lo que habría cabido esperar al principio. Estaba en primer plano, y casi era como si le hubiesen hecho sitio. Kate parecía haber dado por sentado que él sabría por qué; pero ésa era justo la clave. Ocupaba un espacio en el que él mismo, su relación con Kate, apenas tenía sitio para moverse. Pero la señorita Theale tal vez fuese en esa circunstancia una oportunidad parecida a la apaciguada, si no aquiescente, tía Maud. Podía ser cierto también que, si no era una molestia, sería una ventaja. De pronto creyó entender, al reanudar el paseo, que eso podía ser lo que había querido decir Kate. La encantadora joven la adoraba —Densher se había dado cuenta— y protegería, propiciaría, sus encuentros. Podían tener lugar, en otras palabras, en su hotel, lo cual los sacaría de la calle. Era una explicación que tenía sentido. Claro que el hecho de que su próximo encuentro no fuese a depender en nada de Milly parecía contradecirla. Sin embargo, tal vez pudiese explicarse por la necesidad de más preliminares. Una de las cosas que haría el jueves en Lancaster Gate sería comprobar si estaba en lo cierto.

II

Lo extraordinario fue que descubrió, llegado el jueves, que no iba tan desencaminado. Kate no alcanzó a aclarárselo todo, pero sí muchas cosas en un cuarto de hora. Empezó por sorprenderse de que al parecer el martes le hubiese dejado algo por entender. Vio entonces, que las partes, entre sus dedos, encajaban más o menos, y no porque hubiera pasado mucho rato dándoles vueltas. Parecía guapa y brillante, no vieja y exhausta, bajo la claridad general; estaba claro que si no podían ganarse a las damas norteamericanas, lo cual era absurdo, tendrían necesariamente que volver a intentarlo con la tía Maud. No podían decirle a Milly, por muy amable que hubiese sido con ellos: «Nos veremos, por favor, siempre que usted nos deje, en su casa; pero contamos con que nos guarde el secreto». En otras palabras, era inevitable que se lo dijesen a la tía Maud; sería de lo más embarazoso pedirles que no lo hicieran: Kate lo aceptó cuando decidió hablar ella primero. Lo que aceptó le pareció maravilloso a Densher, aunque tal vez tuvo la impresión de ir sacándoselo con cuentagotas en vez de que ella lo expusiera sin más a la luz. Siempre había tenido la impresión, no obstante, de que, cuanto más le pedía, más dispuesta estaba a dárselo. Le había dicho más de una vez incluso antes de su ausencia: «Tienes la llave de la alacena, y preveo que cuando nos casemos me racionarás los terrones de azúcar». Ella respondía que se alegraba de que diese por supuesto que se alimentaría de azúcar, y aquel arreglo doméstico así anticipado parecía haber prevalecido. Los víveres de la alacena en aquel momento no eran demasiado dulces; pero satisfacían en cierto modo sus necesidades inmediatas. En cualquier caso, si sus explicaciones planteaban preguntas, éstas no las agotaban tanto como agotaban la paciencia de Kate. Y como es natural eran, entre todas, las más simples; como por ejemplo darle a entender que la señorita Theale nada podía hacer por ellos. Él sacó a relucir con franqueza lo que se había aventurado a considerar.

—Si no podemos vernos aquí y de verdad hemos agotado las maravillas del aire libre y la multitud, una pequeña balsa en mitad del naufragio, una oportunidad ocasional como la del martes, se me ha antojado estos dos días mejor que nada. Pero, si nuestras amigas son tan fieles a esta casa, no hay más que decir. Es un clavo más, gracias a Dios, en el ataúd de nuestra odiosa espera. —Le alegró poder subrayar sin aspavientos la conclusión—: Espero que comprendas que no hay mucho que podamos hacer.

Si Kate se rio —y lo cierto es que parecía muy alegre— fue por la oportunidad que, en el hotel, él había parecido disfrutar.

—Tu idea está muy bien cuando una recuerda que no has hablado con nadie más que con Milly. —Pero estaba de muy buen humor—. Claro que podrías acostumbrarte a ella… y lo harás. Tienes razón: siempre que estén con nosotros o cerca de nosotros… —Y añadió, con lucidez, que las pobres, como amigas encantadoras que eran, no podrían sino echarles una mano—. Hablarán con la tía Maud, pero no nos cerrarán su puerta: eso sería muy distinto. Un amigo siempre está dispuesto a ayudar, y ella es una amiga. —Había dejado aparte a la señora Stringham y había reducido la cuestión a Milly—. Además, nos tiene mucho afecto. Sobre todo a ti. No sé, chico, habrá que aprovecharlo. —Densher tuvo la sensación de que ella eludía el ultimátum que acababa de hacerle, el claro recordatorio de que, en el mejor de los casos, no podían hacer gran cosa; pero había algunas observaciones —casi siempre las más agudas— que desde el principio ella acostumbraba a no tomarse de manera formal o reverente. Acusaba su efecto de modos menos manidos. Fue lo que sucedió entonces: Densher no creyó de verdad que a ella no le importara. Kate se refirió, no obstante, a una cuestión secundaria—. Dices que no podemos vernos aquí, pero ya ves que es justo lo que estamos haciendo. ¿Se te ocurre algo más gracioso?

No era para atormentarlo: tampoco creyó eso; pero había llegado a la casa con cierta prevención, así que frunció el ceño cuando le dio a entender que era un lujo. ¿No suponía en parte volver al sometimiento? El sometimiento podía estar velado y disimulado, pero sabía en carne propia lo poco que los elevados privilegios de Lancaster Gate favorecían su libertad. Estaban arriba, en uno de los saloncitos de recibir, una

sala amueblada como un tocador, claramente poco utilizada —ajena a cualquier familiaridad— y decorada con un azul feísimo. Él había mirado enseguida con interés las puertas cerradas, y Kate había respondido a dicho interés diciéndole que todo iba bien, que la tía Maud confiaba en ellos, al menos, en esa ocasión; que los dejaría solos y que no tenían nada que temer. Pero esa nueva alusión que acababa de sacarle obró sobre él de manera más directa y puso aún más en evidencia la cuestión. Estaban solos, todo iba bien: volvió a considerar las puertas cerradas y la intimidad tolerada, el sólido silencio de la enorme mansión. Reforzaron en él algo que la exhibición de la voluntad fuerte y encantadora de Kate hacía doblemente vívido. Se reducía —¡qué diablos!— a que no soportaba que se mostrase esquiva con él. No quería ni toleraría que le fuera con subterfugios y evasivas. No quería que fuese más profunda que él, por fina que fuese esa demostración de ingenio o de carácter; quería que su conversación siguiera siendo franca y sencilla y su relación independiente. El resultado fue que al cabo de un instante dijo:

—¿Me aceptarás tal como soy?

Ella se puso un poco pálida ante el tono sincero de sus palabras, lo cual matizó para él de manera deliciosa la fuerza de su voluntad; y el placer que le procuró no disminuyó cuando exclamó con un entusiasmo más conmovedor que ninguna otra cosa que le hubiera dicho.

—¡Ay, déjame intentarlo! Te aseguro que sé lo que hago… no lo estropees: espérame y dame tiempo. Cariño —dijo Kate—, confía en mí, y todo irá de maravilla.

No había vuelto para oírla insinuar que no confiaba en ella; en cambio sí había vuelto —de pronto lo comprendió— para sujetarla con una súbita intensidad que por lo visto su manera de rogarle había hecho felizmente irresistible. La agarró con fuerza y le dijo casi enfadado:

—¿Me quieres, me quieres, me quieres?

Y ella cerró los ojos con la sensación de que podría golpearla y aun así lo soportaría agradecida. Su rendición fue su respuesta y su respuesta su rendición; y, aunque Densher apenas oyó lo que le decía, tanto le aprovechó que pudo apreciar íntimamente que ella era suya. El largo abrazo en que se fundieron supuso la derrota de cualquier evasiva, y extrajo de él la certeza de que lo que Kate tenía de él era real para ella. Era más fuerte que ninguna promesa, y después lo formularía diciendo que había sido sublime y sincera. Era lo único que pedía: sinceridad capaz de soportarlo casi todo. Eso resolvió muchas cosas, y las resolvió de tal modo que no quedó nada por prometer. Votos y promesas aparte, pudieron hablar. De hecho fue como si sólo entonces hubiesen puesto las cartas sobre la mesa. En menos de cinco minutos él aceptó expresamente los argumentos a favor de su plan, y quedó claro que la diferencia establecida en ese tiempo era una diferencia favorable a los medios elegidos por ella. Medios que en cierto modo se habían convertido de pronto en un simple detalle, competencia y preocupación sólo de Kate; se había hecho aún más evidente que su inteligencia obraba al unísono con su pasión.

—Desde luego no quiero —dijo él, y pudo decirlo con una sonrisa de indulgencia— que te pases el tiempo insinuando que no confío en ti.

—¡Eso espero! ¿Qué crees que quiero hacer?

Tuvo que pararse a pensar lo que creía, y lo primero que quedó claro fue por supuesto la rareza, después de todo, de su juego, al que no pudo sino aludir con sinceridad.

—Lo que estamos haciendo al intentar contemporizar de forma tan especial es, en el mejor de los casos, algo que la mayor parte de la gente consideraría una estupidez.

Pero la visita terminó, pese a todo, sin que volviese a intentar hacer valer su «tal como soy». No tenía más dinero tal como era del que había tenido tal como había sido, o del que, ya puestos, tendría probablemente tal como sería siempre; mientras ella, por su parte, comparada su situación con la de hacía unos meses, tenía mucho más que perder. Densher comprendió fácilmente que aquel encuentro en Lancaster Gate lo acentuaba más que sus citas en los parques o en las estaciones de ferrocarril; y sin embargo por otra parte no podía objetar nada. Si la señora Lowder era indiferente su indiferencia se sumaba en cierto modo a lo que Kate tendría que sacrificar si lo aceptaba tal como era. Tanta era, en suma, su habilidad con él que pareció plantear el hecho de que continuasen esperando en condiciones distintas a las del feo azul, la florida porcelana de Sevres y el bronce retorcido con que las expresaba el tocador. De hecho, Kate casi lo dijo todo al afirmar, a propósito de la tía Maud, después de que Densher volviera a insistir, que cuando lo viera, como inevitablemente ocurriría pronto, lo entendería.

—¿Quieres decir —preguntó al oírla— que hay algún indicio claro de que está dispuesta a entrar en razón? No hablo —explicó— de simples hipocresías por su parte ni de descaradas duplicidades. Recuerda, al fin y al cabo, que por muy listos que seamos, y aunque juntos seamos fuertes, admito que… recuerda que puede jugar con nosotros igual que nosotros con ella.

—Ella no quiere jugar conmigo, cariño —replicó Kate con lucidez—, no quiere hacerme sufrir más de lo

necesario. Me quiere demasiado, y todo lo que hace o deja de hacer tiene su valor. Esto tiene un valor: que hoy se haya portado así con nosotros. Creo que está en su habitación, de donde no saldrá mientras estés aquí conmigo. Pero eso no es jugar… ni mucho menos.

—Entonces ¿qué —preguntó el joven—, desde el momento en que no es su bendición y un cheque?

Kate fue concluyente.

—Sólo falta de sordidez. Está por encima de esas minucias. Se fía de nosotros en general, no tiene intención de perseguirnos por los rincones: y, si le pedimos con franqueza alguna cosa… no sé —dijo Kate —, se encogerá de hombros, pero nos dejará hacer. En realidad sólo tiene un defecto: su indiferencia, en lo que a nosotros se refiere, por los detalles. En cualquier caso —prosiguió alegremente la joven—, no es en los detalles donde la combatimos.

—Pues a mí me parece —respondió Densher después de pensarlo un poco— que es en los detalles donde la engañamos —palabras que, nada más pronunciadas, pareció que se aplicaban a él, y también a su compañera, en la agradable sensación dejada por su reciente abrazo.

No obstante, cualquier confusión relacionada con esa aventura se disipó enseguida en Kate, quien, como Densher pudo comprobar con sagrada alegría, necesitaba mucho más que eso para sentirse compungida.

—No digo que podamos repetirlo. Lo de —explicó— de vernos aquí.

Densher, de hecho, se había estado preguntando dónde podrían volver a verse. Si Lancaster Gate les estaba vetado, volvía a plantearse la cuestión.

—¿No puedo volver?

—Desde luego… para verla. En realidad es ella —dijo su compañera con una sonrisa— quien está enamorada de ti.

Eso hizo que él —un poco más serio— la mirase un momento.

—No des por sentado que todo el mundo está enamorado de mí.

Ella dudó.

—No he dicho que lo esté todo el mundo.

—Acabas de decirlo de la señorita Theale.

—He dicho que le gustabas, sí.

—Bueno, viene a ser lo mismo. —Tras lo cual, no obstante, prosiguió—: Por supuesto, debería agradecerle esto personalmente a la señora Lowder.

—¡Ah, pero no demasiado! —Subrayó con alegre ironía las implicaciones de aquel «esto», además de insistir en general en que debían ser prudentes—. ¡Querrá saber por qué se lo agradeces!

Densher dio por buenas ambas consideraciones.

—Sí, no puedo contárselo todo.

Tal vez fuese el modo tan solemne en que lo dijo, pero Kate pareció otra vez divertida. Aunque le aclaró:

—No puedes «contárselo» todo, y tampoco tiene importancia. Tú sé amable con ella. Complácele; haz que se dé cuenta de lo listo que eres, pero que no se te note. Si eres encantador, no necesitarás nada más.

Pero ella también simplificaba demasiado.

—Que yo sepa, la única forma de ser «encantador» es darle a entender que voy a dejarte, y ¡que me parta un rayo si estoy dispuesto! Es —dijo con sentimiento— un juego.

—Pues ¡claro! Pero nunca supondrá que vas a dejarme, o yo a ti, si te dedicas a recordarle lo mucho que te gusta estar conmigo.

—Y, si sigue viéndonos tan obstinados y constantes —preguntó Densher—, ¿qué bien puede hacernos?

Kate se quedó cortada un momento.

—Qué bien puede hacernos ¿qué?

—Que la complazca… cualquier cosa. No puedo —afirmó con impaciencia— complacerla.

Kate volvió a mirarlo con dureza, decepcionada por su falta de coherencia; pero pareció optar por algo mejor que una simple queja.

—Pues ¡yo sí! Déjalo en mis manos.

Se le acercó llevada por la misma compulsión que los había unido antes, y lo abrazó con la urgencia del mismo, tierno e idéntico propósito. Era su forma de rogarle renovada y repetida, lo que al fin y al cabo dejaba claro lo más importante. Y en cierto modo poseerse así el uno al otro disipaba todas las dudas. El resultado fue que Densher, una vez más, dadas las circunstancias, sólo pudo ser generoso. Así que dejó todo en sus manos hasta tal punto que al cabo de unos instantes ella volvió a una de sus previas —y al parecer— más preciadas ideas.

—Acabas de acusarme de decir que Milly está enamorada de ti. Bueno, si insistes, lo admito. Ya lo ves. Será su manera de ayudarnos. Una excusa para que siga viéndote… y nos ayudará a continuar.

Densher se quedó mirándola: era asombrosa.

—Y ¿qué excusa tendré yo para seguir viéndola?

—¡Oh, eso me da igual! —sonrió Kate.

—¿Te da igual que le dé falsas esperanzas?

Ella lo planteó de forma diferente.

—Me da igual que ella te las dé a ti.

—No lo hará… así que no hay de qué preocuparse. Pero ¿cómo va ayudarnos —prosiguió— con lo que sabe?

—¿Lo que sabe? No tiene por qué ser un obstáculo.

Dudó.

—¿Para que nos quiera?

—Para que te ayude. Ella es así —explicó Kate Croy.

Tuvo que hacer un esfuerzo por entenderlo.

—Y ¿no le importará que yo quiera a otra?

—Le importará mucho más consolarte —dijo Kate.

—Pero ¿de qué?

—De que no consigas a la otra.

Él siguió mirándola fijamente.

—Pero ¿cómo sabe ella…?

—¿Que no la conseguirás? No lo sabe; pero tampoco sabe si lo harás. Entretanto, notará tu frustración, pues sabe lo que opina la tía Maud. Eso —añadió con lucidez— le dará la oportunidad de ser amable contigo.

—Y ¿qué me dará la oportunidad de ser a mí? —Preguntó razonablemente pese a todo el joven—. ¿Un sinvergüenza y un farsante?

Kate controlaba hasta tal punto la situación que sonrió ante aquel estallido.

—A ti te gustará mucho. Es exquisita. Hay razones. Y hablo de otras.

—¿Qué otras?

—Ya te lo contaré en otra ocasión. Las que te he dado son suficientes para seguir.

—Para seguir ¿qué?

—Pues para seguir viéndola… digamos lo antes posible: lo cual, por otro lado, no es más que pura educación por tu parte.

Por supuesto él entendió por qué lo decía, y recordó a la perfección lo sucedido entre ellos en Nueva York. No había sido mucho, pero sí muy agradable, y cualquier alusión a esos días podía encender una leve chispa.

—¡Oh, por supuesto iré a verla cuanto antes! Sí —dijo Densher—, que esté enamorada de mí es absurdo; pero, independientemente de eso, tengo que agradecerle sus favores.

Eso parecía ser lo único que quería Kate.

—Pues ya lo ves. Nos encontraremos allí.

—No acabo de entender —respondió él enseguida—, ¿por qué iba a recibirte también a ti?

—Me recibe por mí… es decir, por sí misma. No puede tener mejor opinión de mí. ¡No sé cuántas veces tendré que repetírtelo!

Él siguió sin comprender.

—Pues confieso que se me escapa.

Kate no tuvo más remedio que contárselo como lo veía ella.

—Me considera ya, después de estas pocas semanas, su mejor amiga. Es distinto. Estamos muy unidas. —Y el hecho de que, cuando comprendió que él estaba desconcertado, arrojara por fin un poco de luz pareció confirmarlo—. Por supuesto, no sabe que te quiero. Cree que te quiero tan poco que no vale la pena hablarlo. —Estas observaciones dejaron claro que Densher estaba desconcertado, y Kate celebró sorprendida el efecto—. ¿Es que pensabas que sabía…?

—¿Lo nuestro? Desde luego, si sois tan amigas como me estás dando a entender y no le has dado a entender lo contrario… —Ella soltó un suspiro de impaciencia y Densher se quedó perplejo—. ¿Es que se lo has negado?

Kate alzó los brazos asombrada de que pudiera ser tan obtuso.

—¿Negarlo? Querido, nunca hemos hablado de ti.

—¿Nunca, nunca?

—Por raro que le parezca a tu amor propio, ¡nunca!

No lograba encontrarle sentido.

—Pero ¿no le habrá dicho algo la señora Lowder?

—Muy probablemente. Pero de ti. No de mí.

Eso le pareció incomprensible.

—Y ¿cómo me conoce si no es como una parte de ti?

—¿Cómo? —preguntó triunfante Kate—. Pues exactamente no prestando atención, no tomándolo en cuenta, no apartándose de su manera de actuar. La estrategia de la tía Maud es negar cualquier realidad de nuestra relación —es decir, de que yo esté en peligro por tu causa— como si no hubiese sospechado ni oído hablar de ella. Cree que se librará de ella ignorándola y hundiéndola, siempre que se esfuerce lo suficiente. Con que, a su manera, la negará si tú lo haces. Así es como te conoce aparte de como parte de mí. No les habrá dicho ni por asomo a Milly o la señora Stringham que, como suele decirse, has atraído mi atención.

—Y ¿no crees —dijo Densher— que deben haberlo deducido ellas?

—No, querido, no; ni siquiera —declaró Kate— después de que el martes se topase con nosotros de esa forma tan rara.

—¿No habrá deducido que…?

—Que, por así decirlo, estás loco por mí. Sí, sin duda, ve que me miras con buenos ojos… En mi opinión, se te nota mucho y de manera demasiado evidente. Pero nada más. A mí no se me nota tanto; tal vez, delante de los demás, no lo demuestro demasiado.

—¿Es que puedes demostrarlo más o menos según te convenga? —preguntó Densher.

Kate se quedó un poco cortada, pero salió del aprieto con brillantez.

—No contigo. Aparte de que estás loco por mí —prosiguió—, Milly sólo ve que soy amable.

—¡Debe pensar que muy amable!

—Bueno, pues muy amable. —Kate sonrió—. Está más que dispuesta a pensar que soy muy amable.

El joven se quedó pensativo.

—Pero en un sentido que requeriría más explicaciones.

—Pues lo explico. —Era muy sutil; volvió a su exigencia inicial de libertad de acción y de confianza por su parte—. En fin —añadió—, que lo explicaré.

—Y ¿qué haré yo?

—Reparar en qué distinto será todo si ella piensa… —pero lo cierto es que Kate titubeó. Sólo el silencio de Densher pareció captar, de momento, el aparente sentido de sus palabras; y, antes de que pudiera decir nada, ella recobró la memoria y la prudencia. No debían olvidar que, puesto que la generosidad de la tía Maud había confiado en su honestidad, más valía no echarlo a perder abusando de su paciencia. Él debía marcharse ya; probablemente eso los ayudaría. Pero Kate volvió también a Milly—. Acuérdate de ir a verla.

Densher, no obstante, estaba pensando en otras cosas.

—Entonces ¿puedo volver otro día?

—A ver a la tía Maud… siempre que quieras. Pero no podemos —dijo Kate— volver a gastarle esta jugarreta. No podemos vernos aquí a solas.

—Entonces ¿dónde?

—Ve a ver a Milly —repitió como toda respuesta.

—Y ¿qué ganaré con eso?

—Haz la prueba y lo verás.

—¿Quieres decir que procurarás estar allí? —preguntó Densher—. Supongamos que estás, ¿qué intimidad tendremos?

—Haz la prueba… Ya verás —repitió la joven—. Tendremos que arreglárnoslas como podamos.

—Ésta es precisamente mi impresión. Creo que podríamos arreglárnoslas mejor. —Su idea le hizo dudar un instante, pero luego propuso con convicción—: ¿Por qué no vienes tú a verme?

Fue una pregunta que sus ojos angustiados parecieron responder aclarándole que mostraba muy poca generosidad al esperar una respuesta definitiva y, al pedirle con la mirada que esperara, lo enfrentó a algo que enseguida supo que era su propia compasión. Se encontró ante esa peculiar ternura, y, mientras se preguntaba, tanto en carne como en espíritu, qué concesiones podrían hacer, ella insistió en el peculiar remedio que proponía para sus problemas. Podría haber sido irritante si no le hubiese dado la impresión de que tenía un punto de estupidez.

—Ya verás —dijo ella— cómo notarás la diferencia.

En fin, si no era estúpida tenía que ser inteligente; el estúpido era él: la prueba estaba en que haría lo que ella quisiera. Pero se esforzó una vez más en entender: aquella alusión a la «diferencia» hizo que volviese a darle vueltas a la cuestión. Sin duda había algo sutil pero fuerte en sus palabras:

—¿Es lo que insinuabas hace un momento cuando diste a entender que todo será distinto si la convencemos de que me odias?

No obstante, Kate tuvo solo, ante esa forma tan grosera de plantearlo, uno de sus más acusados gestos de impaciencia con el que puso fin a la conversación. Él abrió la puerta a indicación suya, y Kate lo acompañó hasta el rellano de la escalera como si le hubiera expuesto de tal modo sus posibilidades que cualquier pregunta fuese innecesaria y cualquier duda perversa.

—¡Desde luego quien te odiará seré yo, si estropeas la belleza de lo que veo!

III

En realidad, no obstante, Densher iba a oírla hablar más de aquello que decía ver; y la siguiente ocasión le reservaba además otras sorpresas. A la mañana siguiente de su visita a Kate, recibió de la señora Lowder la expresión telegráfica de la esperanza de que pudiera estar libre para cenar con ellas esa noche; y estarlo le pareció una suerte, aunque mitigada en cierto modo por la propia misiva. «¡Vendrán unas amigas norteamericanas a las que me ha alegrado saber que usted conoce!». Conocer a las amigas norteamericanas era claramente un accidente cuyos frutos iba a saborear en toda su amargura. No obstante, su aprensión, añadamos cuanto antes, se redujo piadosamente, llegado el caso; y el caso fue que, cinco minutos después de su llegada a Lancaster Gate, prescrita para las ocho y media, la señora Stringham se presentó sola. La prolongada luz del día, las lámparas todavía sin encender, la costumbre… todo invitaba a cenar tarde y a que los comensales llegasen aún más tarde; así que, puntual como era, Densher encontró sola a la señora Lowder, ya que Kate no había bajado aún. Pasó con ella unos momentos desconcertantes; desconcertantes, sobre todo, por su tácita invitación a que se comportara con una sencillez sobrenatural. Dios sabe que eso era exactamente lo que él deseaba; pero nunca nadie había dado por descontado con tanta generosidad —con una sencillez verdaderamente sobrenatural— que hacerlo estuviese tan fácilmente a su alcance. Era un detalle en el que la tía Maud pareció ofrecerse como ejemplo, como si dijese con mucha amabilidad: «¿No ve que lo que quiero es que sea usted exactamente igual que yo?». La cantidad de sencillez requerida fue lo que le hizo titubear, aunque en general le gustaban las cantidades que manejaba la señora Lowder. Le habría gustado preguntarle si creía factible que un joven pobre se pareciese a ella en algo; pero pronto se dio cuenta de que ya estaba haciendo lo que quería al permitir que su asombro le hiciese parecer un poco tonto. Además fue consciente de un extraño y leve temor del posible efecto de la conversación; extraño, sin duda, porque lo que más temía no era su aspereza sino su amabilidad. Su aspereza podría haberle enfadado, lo cual siempre era un consuelo; su amabilidad, dada la situación, tendía a avergonzarlo, cosa que la tía Maud, apreciándole como le apreciaba, parecía haber adivinado. Para evitarlo, por tanto, también evitó discutir; lo dominó negándose a discutir. Eso fue lo que le propuso en esa ocasión, y la secreta incomodidad del joven procedía de la sensación de que en general era lo que más le convenía. Que lo dominase era desagradable, pero en realidad lo que más temía era que lo avergonzase, lo cual era muy distinto; y no le importaba que eso también lo avergonzara.

La esencia de su situación era que en una casa como aquélla las tornas siempre podían volverse contra él. «¿Qué tienes que ofrecer, qué tienes que ofrecer?», le susurraba constantemente aquel lugar con evidente ironía envuelta en decoro y educación. La ironía era una alusión renovada a evidentes sobornos, y él ya había podido comprobar que denunciar su fealdad no le era de gran ayuda. Esa fealdad, los metales preciosos —sólo ellos— podían permitírsela; era un acto de vanidad por su parte intentar cubrir de oropel su propia falsedad. La humillación de esa impotencia era precisamente lo que la tía Maud intentaba mitigar al dominarlo; y como sus esfuerzos nunca habían sido tan evidentes es probable que él no percibiese nunca su situación en el mundo con tanta claridad como en ese rato que pasaron esperando a la otra media docena de invitados. La tía Maud dio cordialmente la bienvenida de su viaje a Estados Unidos, respecto al cual sus pocas preguntas, aunque no muy coherentes, sí fueron exhaustivas, y Densher se divirtió viendo en ella, como a través de un cristal transparente, la gestación de un plan y la conciencia súbita de una curiosidad. Reparó en Norteamérica, por sus ojos, como un posible escenario para las actividades sociales; la idea de una visita al maravilloso país se le ocurrió en ese momento, pero, al cabo de un minuto, habló de ella como de su sueño favorito. Densher no la creyó, pero disimuló; y eso ayudó a que ella lo tratara como si fuese inofensivo e inocente. Estaba muy emocionada, con la ayuda añadida de una total ausencia de alusiones, cuando la deslumbrante entrada de Kate subrayó aún más su método. Un método que recibió así apoyo de todas partes, pues ningún joven podía haber sido menos formidable que la tímida persona en cuyo auxilio

llegó ostensiblemente la sobrina de la señora Lowder. A Densher le pareció que lo ostensible en ella, en esa ocasión, era prodigioso; y no menos prodigiosa, ya puestos, fue su propia interpretación de la relación entre las dos mujeres: una relación que iluminó la mirada, no exactamente cariñosa ni demorada, sino blanda e inquisitiva, de la anfitriona, y con la que tuvo que habérselas la joven mientras avanzaba. La recorrió de pies a cabeza, y al hacerlo contaba una historia que hizo que el pobre Densher volviese a sentirse mal; pues intuyó que era algo con lo que Kate debía de lidiar habitual y consumadamente.

La historia era que debía estar siempre empuñando las armas para su benéfico dragón; que en cada instante, pero sobre todo en las ocasiones festivas, tenía el «valor» que le hubiera asignado la señora Lowder. Alto y fijo, ese criterio regía la escena social en Lancaster Gate en todo momento; por eso entonces reconoció algo como la idea artística, la sustancia plástica, impuestas por la tradición, por el genio, por la crítica, respecto a un personaje determinado, a una actriz distinguida. Igual que una persona así se vestía para andar, parecer, hablar y expresar su papel en todos los sentidos, Kate tenía que hacer lo propio con el personaje que había aceptado interpretar bajo el techo de su tía. Dicho personaje estaba hecho de elementos y detalles definidos, perfectamente ponderables por parte de la crítica; y al principio su forma de enfrentarse a ella era asegurarse de dar el último retoque a su maquillaje y de no tener peor aspecto que de costumbre. La apreciación de la tía Maud esa noche era claramente empresarial, y la contribución de la actriz similar a la del soldado en el desfile. Densher se vio a sí mismo en su butaca del teatro; el vigilante empresario estaba oculto en la oscuridad de su palco y la pobre actriz se hallaba ante el resplandor de las candilejas. Pero aprobó, la pobre actriz, como aprobaba siempre; la peluca, el maquillaje, las joyas, todos los rasgos de su expresión impecables, y su entrada fue recibida con la correspondiente salva de aplausos. Conviene aclarar que estas impresiones que describimos en Densher van y vienen en mucho menos tiempo del requerido para describirlas; pero, no obstante, podemos señalar que hubo tiempo suficiente para que se sintiese casi demasiado asustado para participar en la ovación. Creyó haber perdido, por el momento, la presencia de ánimo: de modo que, en cualquier caso, se limitó a contemplar en silencio la habilidad técnica de la mayor de las dos mujeres y el rostro disciplinado de la más joven. Era como si la obra de teatro —cayó en ello de pronto, pues era imposible no darse cuenta de que se trataba de una obra de teatro— la interpretaran ellas y Merton Densher estuviese relegado a ser un simple espectador en una de las butacas más caras de primera fila. Por eso su apreciación se había convertido de pronto en temor: se había convertido, como hemos dicho, en malestar; a pesar de que el rostro disciplinado le dedicaba por encima de las candilejas, o eso le pareció, el leve brillo, vago, delicado pero exquisito, de una especial inteligencia. Así una actriz experimentada podía, incluso mientras la escrutaban los binoculares, enviar una señal a la persona a la que más apreciaba del teatro.

La representación, en todo caso, tal como la veía Densher, prosiguió amplificada enseguida por la llegada de otros dos invitados, dos caballeros, rezagados en la desbandada de la temporada social, que se presentaron visiblemente a Kate para recibir el mismo tratamiento impersonal y ser partícipes de una compasión similar. En extremos opuestos de la escala, exhibían, respecto a la «figura» de cada cual, uno el efecto expansivo y otro el efecto contráctil de un chaleco blanco y perfectamente almidonado. Un grupo improvisado de dos jóvenes inocuos y un pacífico veterano fue lo que encontró la señora Stringham, que llegó con el frufrú del vestido, un poco sin aliento y muy compungida por haber tenido que ir sola. Su amiga, en el último momento, se había sentido indispuesta; no se encontraba muy bien, y la había enviado a ella, con insistencia, con excusas, con enorme pesar. Esta circunstancia de la enfermedad de su encantadora amiga fue de lo primero que comentó Kate con Densher cuando, después de cenar, pudieron disponer de diez minutos a solas, sin aspavientos, «con naturalidad», que era, como ella dijo, lo que le faltaba a él; no obstante, fue como si, por una extraña impresión durante la comida, el joven no se hubiese visto privado del todo de la presencia de la señorita Theale. La señora Lowder había hablado de la querida Milly, y resultó que era un tema de conversación tan familiar para los jóvenes entusiastas como para el sagaz anciano. Y cualquier dato que pudieran ignorar se aprestó a proporcionárselo la sobrina de la señora Lowder, mientras consideraban al propio Densher el más privilegiado del grupo. ¿Acaso no era él quien en cierto sentido había inventado a la maravillosa criatura, al verla primero y capturarla en su selva nativa? ¿No le había más o menos allanado el camino al reparar enseguida en su rareza, al anticiparla, con espíritu amistoso —como si contara con la atención de la sociedad—, con un súbito destello o dos?

El pobre Densher respondió a estas preguntas como mejor pudo, escuchando con interés e incomodidad; torciendo el gesto en particular, como buen periodista, al comprender que suponían que había puesto su pluma —¡su «pluma»!— al servicio de los privilegios particulares. ¿La atención de la sociedad?: hablaban, o casi, como si hubiese escrito públicamente de una joven discreta. Soñaban, creyó entender de hecho, con cosas que a él le despertaban, y se arrellanó en su asiento tanto para soportar la vergüenza como para llegar

a una revelación completa. Su vergüenza se debía a que no podía atribuirse el éxito de la señorita Theale y a que, por cortesía, tampoco podía insistir en que no había tenido nada que ver con ella. Lo que le tocó más de cerca fue que la ocasión adoptó en cierto sentido el aire de un banquete conmemorativo, un festín para celebrar una carrera breve y brillante. Por supuesto se habló más de la protagonista que si no hubiese estado ausente, y Densher se quedó estupefacto del alcance del triunfo de Milly. La señora Lowder decía maravillas de ella; los dos caballeros del chaleco, fuese con sinceridad o hipocresía, opinaban también en calidad de expertos; y Densher por fin pareció comprender que se hallaba ante un «caso» social. Obviamente, el testimonio más invocado habría sido el de la señora Stringham si, como representante de su amiga, no hubiese visto limitada su función a aspirar el incienso; así que Kate, que la trató muy bien, y no dejó de sonreírle, animarla y consolarla desde el otro lado de la mesa, dio la impresión de hablar e interpretar para ella. Kate hablaba como si fuese incapaz de entender el modo en que ellos apreciaban a Milly, pero pese a todo les permitiera expresarlo con tosquedad. El propio Densher fue consciente de estar emparentado en cierto modo con la señora Stringham; y se preguntó de hecho, mientras escuchaba la conversación, cómo afectaría a la sensibilidad nerviosa norteamericana. Hasta entonces sólo había oído hablar de ese tipo de sensibilidad, pero en su reciente viaje había tenido ocasión de sorprenderla en su elemento, y hubo un momento o dos en los que se le ocurrió que tal vez —y no como escapatoria— hubiese aprendido algo de ella.

Era evidente que dicha sensibilidad temblaba, se estremecía, vibraba y palpitaba en el organismo de la señora Stringham: pues esta dama le pareció, como decían en su país, entusiasmada, por la captación de más elementos de los que él podía contar. Imaginó que debía de percibir matices que a él le parecían oscuros; pues, aunque estaba inconfundiblemente alegre y jubilosa, la notó a veces más agitada de lo que podía explicar su alegría. Era el suyo un estado de emoción que difícilmente podía justificar sólo su impaciencia por ir a informar a Milly. Su pequeña y seca brillantez de Nueva Inglaterra —si de complejidad se trataba, él había «catalogado» todos los matices de complejidad norteamericana— tenía sus propias razones para encontrar alivio sobre todo en el silencio; de modo que antes de que cambiaran de tema se dio cuenta (con sorpresa) de que la habían hartado. Él también se sintió harto cuando le preguntaron si era cierto que su amiga nunca habría gozado en su país del enorme éxito que había tenido en Londres. Fue la propia señora Lowder quien formuló la pregunta; y él no supo si le impresionó más que la planteara delante de las narices de la señora Stringham o que tuviese la esperanza de que cediera a Londres el honor de su descubrimiento. El menos expansivo de los chalecos blancos propuso la teoría de que en Londres —por mucho que dijesen— eran mucho más perspicaces que en Estados Unidos: no sería la primera vez, afirmó, que enseñaban a los norteamericanos a apreciar un producto nativo (sobre todo si era divertido). No quería decir con eso que la señorita Theale fuese divertida, aunque sí rara, y en eso consistía precisamente su encanto; pero podía muy bien ser que Nueva York no hubiese reparado en la buena suerte que tenía al contarla entre los suyos. Había mucha gente que allí no era nadie y que era muy bien acogida en Inglaterra; igual que —gracias a Dios la balanza estaba equilibrada— a veces ellos enviaban bellezas y celebridades que dejaban fríos a los británicos. La temperatura de los británicos, de hecho, no podía calcularse: afirmación que causó una febril respuesta por parte de la señora Stringham. Declaró que, si bien el punto de vista para la debida admiración por su joven amiga parecía haber fallado un poco en Nueva York, no cabía duda de que había conquistado Boston por asalto. Lo cual indicaba que, en cuestión de refinamiento del gusto, Nueva York no podía compararse con Boston; y la buena señora, como exponente de esa doctrina —que expuso con cierto detalle—, hizo, obviamente, en opinión de Densher, lo más parecido a ofrecerles la rareza de la que los había privado la ausencia de Milly. Y lo hizo al dirigirse de pronto a él:

—No sabe usted nada, señor, ni lo más mínimo, de mi amiga.

No había pretendido saberlo, pero había un reproche muy puro en el rostro y en el tono de la señora Stringham, una pureza aparentemente cargada de solemnes significados; y, así, por un instante, por pequeñas que hubiesen sido sus pretensiones, Densher no pudo sino tener la sensación de que la mujer estaba exagerando. Se preguntó qué querría decir, pero al mismo tiempo se puso a la defensiva.

—Desde luego no sé mucho, aparte de que fue muy amable conmigo en Nueva York en mi calidad de extranjero perplejo y recién desembarcado, y de que le quedé enormemente agradecido. —A lo cual añadió, sin saber muy bien por qué, unas palabras que tuvieron un éxito instantáneo—: Recuerde, señora Stringham, que usted no estaba.

—¡Ya lo ve! —exclamó Kate con expresión divertida, aunque él no acertó a entender a qué se refería.

—No estabas allí, querida —coincidió la señora Lowder—. Y no sabes —continuó con meliflua alegría— lo lejos que llegaron las cosas.

Merton notó que eso sacaba de sus casillas a la señora Stringham. Tenía más cosas en la cabeza que

ninguno de ellos; con la excepción tal vez de Kate, cuya mirada de soslayo creyó notar en aquel absurdo momento, aunque se alegró —debido al propio absurdo de la situación— de no mirarla a los ojos. Miró a los de la señora Stringham y le impresionaron: con ella podría entenderse llegado el momento, o esa sensación tuvo, por la muda comunión entre ellos que señalaba el comienzo, como demostraría después la situación, de algo extraordinario. El efecto de semejante comunión fue que la señora Stringham vaciló perceptiblemente al responder a la pulla de la señora Lowder.

—Oh, precisamente mi argumento es que el señor Densher no pudo disponer de muchas oportunidades. —Luego le sonrió—. Tampoco estuve fuera tanto tiempo.

Esto hizo, de la manera más extraña del mundo, que todo se aclarase de inmediato para él.

—Ni yo estuve mucho en Nueva York. —Comprendió con claridad que no habría más malentendidos con ella—. Es muy hermosa, pero eso no quiere decir que sea fácil conocerla.

—¡Ah, es mil y una cosas! —replicó la buena señora, como para congraciarse con él.

Densher no habría podido pedir más.

—Se vino con usted antes de que pudiera darme cuenta. Y yo partí también a otros sitios maravillosos, donde tenía muchas más cosas que ver.

—Pero ¡no la olvidó usted! —intervino la tía Maud con una astucia casi amenazadora.

—No, por supuesto que no. Uno no olvida impresiones tan encantadoras. Pero nunca —añadió con lucidez— hablé de ella con nadie.

—Ella se lo agradecerá —dijo la señora Stringham con ruborizada firmeza.

—Y ¿no demuestra a menudo el silencio en esos casos lo profundo de la impresión?

A él le habría hecho gracia, si no le hubiese fastidiado un poco todo lo que todos parecían querer endosarle.

—La impresión fue tan profunda como usted quiera. Pero lo que quiero que comprenda la señorita Theale —continuó dirigiéndose a la señora Stringham— es que en ningún modo permito que se me tome por una autoridad sobre su persona.

Kate corrió en su ayuda —si es que puede llamarse así—, antes de que su amiga pudiera responder.

—Tiene usted razón en lo de que no es fácil conocerla. La ve una con intensidad, la ve más que a nadie, pero luego descubre que eso no es conocerla y que podría conocer mejor a alguien a quien, como digo, no hubiese visto ni la mitad.

La puntualización era interesante, pero les devolvió al hecho de su éxito; y fue en esa circunstancia vulgar en comparación, expuesta con tanta claridad ante ellos, cuando la angustiada amiga de Milly empezó a mirar: empezó a mirar de una forma muy parecida a como podría haber contemplado un espectador en un circo de la antigüedad la rareza de una doncella cristiana, en la arena, martirizada suave y acariciadoramente. Era el roce y el husmear no de leones y tigres, sino de animales domésticos que habían soltado para gastarle una broma. Pero incluso la broma incomodó a la señora Stringham, y su muda comunión con Densher, a la que ya hemos aludido, se vio más y más acentuada. Luego Densher se preguntó si Kate lo habría adivinado; aunque no fue hasta mucho después cuando se descubrió separando en su imaginación las cosas de las que ella podía haber sido consciente de las que debía de haber pasado por alto. En cualquier caso, si de verdad había pasado por alto la incomodidad de la señora Stringham, eso sólo demostraba hasta qué punto la obsesionaba su idea. Dicha idea consistía en insistir en la preeminencia de la joven al final de la temporada para que Densher siguiera, para los demás, relacionado con el presente y el pasado. «Es todo lo que ha pasado desde entonces lo que hace que te sientas un poco tímido. No sabes lo que ha sucedido, pero nosotros sí; lo hemos visto y seguido; casi hemos formado parte de ello». Lo importante para él, según Kate, era ineludiblemente que el caso fuese real: una de esas cosas que, si su paciencia hubiese sido más corta que su curiosidad, habría considerado vagamente posible en Londres, pero por la que nunca se habría interesado lo más mínimo. La repentina aventura social de la pequeña norteamericana, su feliz y, sin duda, inofensivo florecimiento, probablemente lo hubiesen favorecido diversas circunstancias, pero por encima de todo lo había favorecido el trampolín del escenario, uno de esos caprichos vulgares de la turba estúpida e innúmera, movimientos gregarios tan inescrutables como las corrientes oceánicas. El rebaño apelotonado había corrido a ciegas hacia ella, igual que podría haber salido huyendo. Había habido, por supuesto, una señal, pero la verdadera razón había sido probablemente la ausencia en ese momento de un león mayor. El animal más grande llegaría y el pequeño desaparecería irremediablemente. En cualquier caso, era característico, y su esencia trigo para su molino literario, materia para su pluma periodística. Esta pluma se ejercitaba ya mentalmente, sobre aquel motivo, como un indicio de la temporada, un rasgo de la época, de la naturaleza puramente expeditiva y violenta del éxito social. El éxito en sí mismo era lo único que importaba: el protagonista del proceso era en comparación una cuestión

menor. Cualquier cosa podía triunfar si no había nada que triunfara más: el autor de un libro «penoso», la belleza que no era una belleza, la heredera que no era más que eso, la extranjera que sólo se salvaba de ser fatigosamente extranjera siendo fatigosamente familiar, la norteamericana cuyo norteamericanismo hacía mucho que había desaparecido, la criatura en suma de quien pudieran predicarse ruidosamente lunares y lentejuelas de algún género lo suficientemente llamativo y expuesto.

Así lo juzgó al menos, dentro de sus limitaciones, y la idea de que lo que había reducido así a puros hechos era el engaño de la moda y el tono de la sociedad sirvió para hacerle recobrar su sentido de la independencia. Se había tenido siempre por persona civilizada; pero ¡si eso era la civilización…! Si dentro no se decían más que tonterías más valía salir a fumar una pipa. Había evitado, como hemos dicho, mirar a Kate a los ojos, pero llegó un momento en que le habría gustado gritarle desde el otro lado de la mesa: «Oye, amor mío, ¿es esto el gran mundo?». Aunque conviene añadir que luego llegó otro —y sin duda como resultado de algo que, pendía sobre ellos por encima del mantel—, en que le pareció que le había respondido: «¡Oh, no! ¿Por quién me tomas? Ni mucho menos: es sólo una imitación mala y estúpida, aunque bastante inocente». Lo que ella podría haber dicho, no obstante, se mezcló en la práctica con lo que dijo, pues acudió abiertamente en su ayuda, como si adivinara algunos de sus pensamientos. Enunció, para aliviar su desconcierto, la verdad evidente de que no podías marcharte de Londres tres meses en esa época del año y que a tu regreso los amigos siguieran siendo exactamente igual. Por supuesto, se habían pasado el día bailando y lo lógico era encontrarlos tan acalorados que apenas resultasen reconocibles. Kate reconcilió en suma su desmentido sobre Milly con el honor de haberla descubierto, del que no podía zafarse con modestia. Él la había encontrado, pero habían sido ellos, todos juntos, quienes la habían desarrollado. Siempre había sido una seductora, una de las más grandes jamás vistas, pero no era la persona a la que él había «apoyado».

Densher llegaría después a la conclusión de que Kate no había tenido al hacer esas bromas ninguna intención de ser insolente ni de tomarse conscientemente a la ligera los derechos de la pobre Susan Shepherd sobre su joven amiga, derechos, que después de tales comentarios, quedaron muy cuestionados; pero también concluyó que a la señora Stringham le habían molestado, pues la señora Stringham era de la opinión, como él tendría ocasión de vislumbrar después, de que todas las Kate Croys de la cristiandad no eran más que polvo en los pies de su Milly. Aunque también es cierto que sólo lo habría admitido si se hubiese visto obligada a atrincherarse en su entusiasmo: el raro entusiasmo de la amistad, el único de su vida, aparte del otro, más imperturbable y cerebral, que sentía por el arte de Guy de Maupassant. Dejó caer la observación de que su Milly era incapaz de cambiar y era, muy por el contrario, la misma Milly; pero eso no afectó a la argumentación de Kate. Estuvo amabilísima con Susie, como si supiese con seguridad que era incapaz de expresar su desacuerdo porque Kate tenía clase y ella admiraba a la gente con clase. Kate tuvo ocasión después —se las arregló para encontrarla— de contarle a nuestro joven que Milly le había hablado de la forma de pensar de la buena señora. Le gustaría —ella misma se lo había contado a Milly— incluir a Kate Croy en uno de sus libros y ver lo que podía hacer con ella. «Picarme muy fina o servirme entera»: Kate declaró que esa forma de utilizar a la gente la aterrorizaba. No obstante, sabía que era lo que haría la señora Stringham, pues, curiosamente, se creía obligada a utilizar el material —un material que (a pesar de Maud Manningham, que siempre desbordaba sentimentalismo) no había visto nunca— del que estaba hecho la extraña joven inglesa. Todo eso lo comprobaría después, pero ya entonces Densher podría haberlo notado en el aire. Estaba en él cuando Kate, renunciando a la cuestión del cambio químico de su amiga, concluyó con la proposición comparativamente indiscutible de que, ya que se había perdido tantas cosas, Densher debería, en adelante, confiar en ellos para ponerse al día. Él la escuchó sin inmutarse, tal vez siguiendo el ejemplo de la señora Stringham:

—¡Oh, cuanto usted quiera!

Eso surtió efecto: la señora Stringham se hizo cargo de la parte que le correspondía. Lo bueno de ella era que sabía aquilatar muy bien las cosas; de modo que cuando concluyó la cena habían avanzado mucho.

IV

Luego resultó que el más joven de los otros dos hombres estaba en su elemento delante del piano; de modo que tomaron café y escucharon canciones cómicas en el piso de arriba; los caballeros, momentáneamente abandonados, aceptaron con agrado la orden que les dio la señora Lowder al retirarse de que no tardasen demasiado. Nuestro joven sí tardó cuando volvió al salón; dejó claro a Kate que, de vez en cuando, podían estar juntos sin ofender a nadie. Tal vez sus necesidades fuesen más fuertes que las de ella; pero Kate tenía mejores apelativos para los leves riesgos que consentía correr. Era una ventaja de una casa tan grande que los espacios fuesen amplios y que, una noche de agosto, las ventanas estuviesen abiertas, gracias a lo cual la tía Maud pudo, en un momento dado, recibir a su reducido cortejo en el ancho balcón donde corría un poco más de fresco. Densher y Kate ocuparon entonces, el uno al lado del otro, un pequeño sofá: un lujo que ésta definió como la prueba, ante cualquier posible crítica, de que tenían la conciencia tranquila. «Fingir que no nos conocemos, ahora que estás aquí, sería exagerar», dijo la joven y lo arregló con mucho encanto para que tuvieran que pasar un rato juntos a fin de despistar a la tía Maud. De lo contrario se habría preguntado qué demonios ganaban ellos. Para Densher, no obstante, esos momentos y contactos robados eran parciales y pobres; había en ese momento particular más cosas en su imaginación de las que podía expresar mientras contemplaba las cristaleras. Aunque ella hizo frente a todas —y a más de las que podía tratar en ese momento— al aludir a Milly en un tono distinto del que había utilizado en la cena.

—No está muy bien. De salud, digo. Fíjate esta noche. Por lo visto es grave. Por ti habría venido, de haber podido.

Él se lo tomó con toda la paciencia de la que pudo hacer acopio.

—¿Se puede saber qué le pasa?

Pero Kate continuó sin decírselo.

—A no ser que tu presencia aquí haya sido un obstáculo.

—¿Se puede saber qué le pasa? —volvió a preguntar Densher.

—Lo que acabo de decirte: que le gustas mucho.

—Entonces ¿por qué se ha privado del placer de verme?

Kate miró a su alrededor: necesitaría mucho tiempo para explicárselo.

—Tal vez sea cierto que no se encuentra bien. Es muy posible.

—Más que posible, diría yo, a juzgar por la visible angustia y preocupación de la señora Stringham.

—Desde luego. Aunque puede que no sea sólo eso —dijo Kate.

—Entonces ¿qué?

Pero, después de pensárselo, también pasó por alto esa pregunta.

—¿Por qué, de ser cierto, no se vuelve ya a casa esa buena mujer? Estará preocupada y aquí ya ha cumplido de sobra.

—Creo —observó Densher— que ha cumplido más que de sobra. —Tuvo la impresión de que Kate lo miraba aún con más dureza; pero ella se explicó enseguida:

—Su preocupación probablemente tenga dos motivos. Uno la impulsa a volver, pero el otro la obliga a quedarse. Milly le ha encargado que se lo cuente todo de ti.

—En ese caso —dijo el joven, entre la risa y el suspiro— me alegro de haber sentido, cuando estábamos abajo, cierta atracción por ella. ¿No te parece que he sido muy amable?

—Mucho. Tienes intuición, malvado. Todo va bien —declaró Kate.

—Excepto tal vez —sugirió él con cinismo un instante después— que ahora no está viendo nada bueno de mí. ¿Le hablará de esto a Milly? —Y luego, como Kate pareció preguntarse a qué se refería con lo de «esto», añadió—: Lo de nuestro presente desprecio de las apariencias.

—¡Ah, déjame a mí las apariencias! —Lo dijo con altivez—. Yo lo arreglaré. Además —añadió—, la tía

Maud la tiene tan absorbida que no lo notará. —Densher sintió, al oírla, que su compañera tenía de hecho una perspicacia que él no podía igualar: por ejemplo cuando agregó—: Y la señora Stringham parece que le responda para dar justo esa impresión.

—¡En fin —comentó Densher con humor—, la vida es muy interesante! Espero que lo sea tanto para ti como haces que lo sea para los demás; sobre todo a juzgar por lo interesante que haces que sea para mí. Tengo la sensación de que crees que es igual de emocionante para *ces dames*[34] cada una a su manera: la tía Maud, Susan Shepherd, Milly, Pero ¿qué le ocurre? —concluyó—. ¿De verdad está tan mal?

Al principio fue como si el semblante de Kate diera a entender que estas despectivas palabras no merecían respuesta; luego pareció ceder a una necesidad propia: la necesidad de dejar claro que «tan mal» era la peor descripción que podía darse de su estado. Si hubiese estado tan enferma como parecía difícilmente habría podido tener relevancia para ellos, pues en ese caso su fin estaría próximo. No obstante, ella se creía —y Kate no podía sino creerlo también— gravemente amenazada. Convenía tener presente que las dos damas habían estado a punto de dejar la ciudad y se habían quedado.

—La tía Maud y yo nos despedimos —o casi— de ellas la noche antes de que Milly nos encontrase juntos, cuando fue de manera tan inesperada a la National Gallery para ver por última vez los cuadros. En aquel momento tenían intención de partir al cabo de uno o dos días. Pero no se han ido… ni parece que se vayan a ir. Cada vez que las veo, como esta mañana, se inventan algún pretexto ostentoso. Iban a marcharse, pero han retrasado el viaje. —Tras lo cual la joven dijo—: Lo han retrasado por ti. —Él se quejó cuanto podía quejarse sin parecer fatuo, pues incluso la queja implicaba que lo consideraba posible; pero Kate, como siempre, lo tenía clarísimo—. Has hecho que Milly cambiase de opinión. No quiere añorarte, pero también quiere que no se le note; y, como he insinuado antes, es posible que por eso no haya venido esta noche. No sabe cuándo volverá a verte; ni siquiera si volverá a verte. No imagina el futuro. Se ha desplegado ante ella en estas últimas semanas como una cosa oscura y confusa.

Densher preguntó:

—¿Después de esta temporada social tan maravillosa que, según decís todos, ha pasado?

—Exacto. Hay una sombra que la oscurece.

—¿La sombra, te parece, de un deterioro físico?

—Un deterioro físico. Ni más ni menos. Le asusta. Tiene mucho que perder. Y quiere más.

—Ah, muy bien —dijo Densher, con una súbita y extraña sensación de incomodidad—, y ¿no podría explicarle alguien que no lo puede tener todo?

—No… porque nadie querría. En realidad —prosiguió Kate—, ha causado muy buena impresión. Pregunta a la tía Maud… Tal vez creas que tengo prejuicios —añadió con una extraña sonrisa—. La tía Maud te lo dirá… Tiene el mundo a sus pies. Todo empezó después de que la vieses, y es una pena que te lo hayas perdido, porque sin duda te habría divertido. Ha sido todo un éxito, dentro, claro, de lo posible en tan poco tiempo, y lo ha sobrellevado como un auténtico ángel. Imagina un ángel con una abultadísima cuenta en el banco y tendrás la expresión más sencilla de a qué me refiero. Su fortuna es inmensa; la tía Maud ha averiguado todos los datos, o la mayor parte, en sus últimas confidencias con «Susie», y Susie sabe de lo que habla. Ahora lo sabes por tus últimas confidencias conmigo. Ya lo ves —Kate expresó ante todo a qué se reducían las cosas—. Como ves, podría casarse con quien quisiera. Te aseguro que no somos vulgares. Sus posibilidades son evidentes.

Densher dio a entender que no le inspiraban ni desagrado ni desconfianza.

—Pero, entonces, ¿qué puedo hacer yo por ella?

Kate tenía preparada la respuesta.

—Consolarla.

—¿De qué?

—De todo eso que, si está enferma, va a perder por fuerza. No me preocuparía si no tuviese tanto —dijo Kate sin más. Y luego, al verlo sonreír con cierta amargura, añadió—: No me preocuparía si hubiera algo que tuviese de verdad. —La joven hablaba sin duda con una noble compasión—. No tiene nada.

—¿Ni siquiera a esos jóvenes duques?

—Bueno, ya veremos… Veremos qué se puede esperar de ellos. En todo caso ella ama la vida. Conocer a alguien como tú —siguió explicándole Kate— equivale a sentir, aparte de otras muchas cosas, que te conviertes en parte de la vida. ¡Oh, ya ha hecho planes para ti!

—Me parece, querida, que eres tú la que los ha hecho… —Parecía distante y triste—. Dime ¿qué se supone que debo hacer con los duques?

—¡Oh, los duques se llevarán una decepción!

—Y ¿por qué no iba a ser yo quien se decepcionase?

—Tú no habrás puesto en juego tantas esperanzas —dijo Kate con una maravillosa sonrisa—. Además, también te decepcionarás. Habrás puesto las suficientes.

—Y, sin embargo, ¿quieres que lo haga?

—Quiero —dijo la joven— que las cosas sean agradables para ella. Utilizo con ese propósito lo que tengo a mano. Tú eres lo más precioso que tengo, y por tanto lo que más uso.

Él se quedó un buen rato mirándola.

—Ojalá pudiera usarte yo un poco más. —Luego, al ver que ella seguía sonriendo—. ¿Es una enfermedad pulmonar grave? —preguntó.

Por un instante dio la impresión de que Kate habría preferido que lo fuese.

—Creo que no son los pulmones. ¿No es curable la tuberculosis si se coge a tiempo?

—Desde luego hay quien se cura —antes de que ella pudiera responder, añadió—: La verdad es que parece que su presencia física la ponga a salvo de esas cosas; a pesar de su juventud es la de alguien que ha pasado ya por todo lo que es concebible que pueda pasarle a uno. Parece, diría yo, la superviviente de un naufragio. Alguien así sin duda podría, según la doctrina de las probabilidades, hacerse a la mar con confianza. Ya ha tenido su naufragio y ha vivido su aventura.

—¡Oh, te concedo lo del naufragio! —Kate tenía respuesta para todo—. Pero deja que viva su aventura. Hay naufragios que no son aventuras.

—¡Bueno… con tal de que haya aventuras que no sean naufragios! —Densher, en suma, estaba dispuesto, pero volvió a lo que había dicho antes—. Lo que digo es que no da la impresión, a los sentidos o lo que sea, de ser una enferma.

Kate, lo admitió.

—No… en eso radica su belleza.

—¿Su belleza…?

—Sí, ¡es maravillosa! No se le notará, igual que tu reloj, cuando está a punto de pararse por falta de cuerda, no te avisa ni parece diferente de lo normal. No tendrá una muerte, ni una vida, lenta. No olerá, por así decirlo, a medicamentos. No sabrá, por así decirlo, a medicina. No se enterará nadie.

—Entonces ¿de qué estamos hablando? —preguntó francamente confundido—. ¿En qué estado tan extraordinario se encuentra?

Kate prosiguió como si, a partir de ese momento, hablara para sus adentros.

—Creo que, si está enferma, es muy grave. Creo que si está mal, no está un poco mal. No sabría decirte por qué, pero así es como la veo. Vivirá de verdad o morirá. Lo tendrá todo o lo perderá todo. Y no creo que vaya a tenerlo todo.

Densher la había escuchado sin quitarle los ojos de encima, mientras ella paseaba pensativa la mirada como si sus palabras le parecieran más impresionantes que lúcidas.

—¿«Crees» y «dejas de creer», pero no tienes ni idea de qué es lo que le pasa?

—No, no es que no tenga ni idea; pero no quiero saberlo. Y ella tampoco quiere que se entere nadie; tiene, respecto a lo que tal vez esté consumiéndola, una especie de ferocidad o de modestia, una especie de… no sé cómo llamarlo, orgullo muy marcado. Y además, y además… —Pero entonces titubeó.

—Además ¿qué?

—Soy muy bruta con eso de las enfermedades. Las detesto. Tienes suerte, querido —prosiguió Kate—, de estar sano como una manzana.

—¡Gracias! —se rio Densher—. Pero también tú eres afortunada de ser fuerte como un roble.

Ella lo miró un momento como regocijándose de sus jóvenes inmunidades. Era lo único que tenían, pero al menos lo tenían sin fisuras: los dos contaban con la belleza, la felicidad física, la virtud personal, el amor y el deseo del otro. Sin embargo, fue como si esa misma conciencia los devolviera instantes después a la compasión por la pobre chica que lo tenía todo en el mundo, bienes inmensos de los que ellos, ¡ay!, carecían, pero a la que, por otro lado, le faltaba justamente eso.

—¡Qué manera de hablar de ella! —suspiró compungida Kate. Pero ahí estaban los hechos—: No quiero saber nada de enfermedades.

—No es verdad… puesto que estás, a pesar de lo que digas, implicada.

—¡Ah, no soy más que una espectadora…!

—Y ¿quieres que ocupe tu lugar? ¡Muchas gracias!

—¡Oh! —dijo Kate—, es mi manera de meterte en esto. De ese modo tendrás la medida de lo que espero de ti. Nunca es pronto para empezar.

Apartó, cuando creyó notar un movimiento en el balcón, la mano que un minuto antes él había tomado entre las suyas, y la advertencia volvió a ponerlo en guardia.

—¿No sabes siquiera si su caso requiere cirugía?

—Diría que es posible; en fin, si tiene algo, tal vez haya que aplicarla. Por supuesto, está en las mejores manos.

—Entonces ¿la han visto los médicos?

—Los ha visto ella, que viene a ser lo mismo. Creo que ya puedo decírtelo: ha ido a consultar a *sir* Luke Strett.

Densher hizo una mueca.

—¡Ay, es como si me clavaras un puñal! —Y, al cabo de un instante, añadió—: Uno puede adivinar…

Sí, pero ella lo contuvo.

—No adivines. Limítate a hacer lo que te digo.

Por un momento, en silencio, lo comprendió todo, como si lo tuviera ante sus ojos.

—Entonces ¿quieres que me gane el favor de una chica enferma?

—¡Ah!, pero acabas de admitir que no te parece una enferma. Además, tú sabes hasta dónde llegar… y hasta dónde no.

—Es sorprendente —respondió enseguida— la de cosas que crees que sé.

—Bueno, es lo que das a entender, cariño —respondió—; ha sido tu modo de conquistarme. Aparte de que, puestos a eso, otros muchos querrán ganarse su favor.

Por un instante, Densher, bajo el influjo de estas palabras, creyó estar viendo a su joven amiga sobre una pila de almohadones y con un perpetuo vestido de tarde, entre flores y con las persianas echadas, rodeada de la más alta aristocracia.

—Los demás pueden hacer lo que quieran. Además, ellos son libres.

—Y ¡tú también, cariño!

Lo dijo con una impaciencia, que acentuó al ponerse de pronto en pie; a pesar de lo cual él se quedó en su sitio y se limitó a mirarla.

—¡Eres prodigiosa!

—Pues ¡claro que soy prodigiosa! —y enseguida tuvo ocasión de demostrárselo mientras él seguía mirándola. La puerta del recibidor se había abierto para dejar pasar a un caballero que, nada más verla, fue a saludarla antes de que el anuncio de su nombre pudiera llegar a oídos de su compañero. No obstante, Densher se vio introducido muy pronto en la conversación; pues la bienvenida que ofreció Kate al visitante se convirtió casi precipitadamente en una llamada de auxilio a su amigo, que respondió levantándose despacio.

—No sé si conoce a lord Mark —y luego añadió dirigiéndose a la otra parte—: El señor Merton Densher, recién llegado de Norteamérica.

—¡Ah! —exclamó la otra parte, mientras Densher guardaba silencio, ocupado como estaba en sopesar aquella interjección. Al instante comprendió que era menos imponderable de lo que parecía y que tenía rasgos claros. No era, supo enseguida, el «¡Ah!» de un idiota, por grande que fuese superficialmente el parecido: era el del hombre inteligente y experimentado; era la especialidad de quien lo había pronunciado, y para producirlo habían hecho falta muchas vivencias y una educación muy cara. Densher notó que despertaba su curiosidad como un objeto de valor encontrado por casualidad. Los tres siguieron un rato de pie, con una incomodidad a la que él fue consciente de contribuir; Kate no le pidió a lord Mark que se sentara y le indicó que podría encontrar a la señora Lowder, y a unos amigos, en el balcón.

—¡Oh!, y a la señorita Theale, supongo; me ha parecido oír, desde la calle, la voz inconfundible de la señora Stringham.

—Sí, pero la señora Stringham ha venido sola. Milly no se encuentra bien —explicó la joven— y se ha visto obligada a decepcionarnos.

—¡Ah!, ¡«decepcionarnos», sin duda! —Y, demorándose un poco, clavó la mirada en Densher—. Confío en que no sea nada grave.

Densher, después de lo que había oído, supuso lógicamente que estaba interesado por Milly, pero también lo imaginó interesado por el joven con quien había encontrado a Kate y al que observaba con gesto impasible. Dicho joven concluyó al momento que estaba haciendo lo que quería al tranquilizarle sobre las dos cosas. Kate le ayudó al exclamar:

—¡No, por Dios, no creo! Acabo de decírselo al señor Densher —añadió—, que está tan preocupado como todos. He estado calmando sus aprensiones.

—¡Ah! —volvió a decir lord Mark y, una vez más, con eso bastó. Densher comprendió, o creyó comprender que estaba dedicado a él. Luego se dirigió a Kate—: Las mías también necesitan que las calmen. Tendremos que cuidarla muy bien. ¿Se sale por aquí?

Ella lo acompañó unos pasos, y mientras Densher los observaba con atención, volvieron a detenerse a conversar. No oyó lo que se dijeron, pero Kate regresó con él enseguida; lord Mark fue con los demás.

Densher estaba ya preparado.

—¿Es el candidato de tu tía?

—Oh, sí, en todos los sentidos.

—Digo para ti.

—Y yo también —sonrió Kate—. Ahí lo tienes. Ahora puedes juzgar.

—Juzgar ¿qué?

—A él.

—Y ¿por qué iba a juzgarlo? —preguntó Densher—. No tengo nada que ver con él.

—Entonces ¿por qué preguntas?

—Para juzgarte a ti; que es cosa muy diferente.

Kate pareció considerar un instante la diferencia.

—¿Para calcular el peligro que corro?

Él dudó; luego dijo:

—Diría más bien que estoy pensando en la señorita Theale. ¿Cómo concilia tu tía su interés por ella…?

—¿… con el interés de él por mí?

—Con su propio interés por ti —continuó Densher mientras Kate se paraba a reflexionar—. Si dicho interés, el de la señora Lowder, adopta la forma de lord Mark, ¿no debería éste tener cuidado con las formas que adopta él?

Kate pareció interesada por la cuestión, pero respondió:

—¡Oh! Cambia de forma con facilidad. Lo bueno es que no se fía de él.

—¿Milly?

—Bueno… Milly tampoco. Pero digo la tía Maud. En realidad no.

Densher demostró su sorpresa.

—¿Lo ha elegido y sin embargo desconfía?

—Sí —dijo Kate—, las personas son así. Dios sabe lo que piensan de sus enemigos; pero aún es más sorprendente lo que piensan de los amigos. El estado de ánimo de Milly, no obstante —prosiguió— es providencial. Es la garantía de la tía Maud, aunque no lo reconozca del todo… y también la de Milly.

—Entonces ¿crees que no hacerle caso es una escapatoria?

Ella movió la cabeza con un delicado gesto de reproche.

—No tendrías que hacerme hablar demasiado. Pero me alegro.

—¿De no hablar demasiado?

—De no hacerle caso.

—¡Ah! —respondió Densher con una interjección como la de lord Mark. A lo cual añadió—: ¿Estás totalmente segura de que esa pobre chica tampoco se lo hace?

—¡Ay, ya sabes lo que opino de esa pobre chica! —Había vuelto a impacientarla.

Sin embargo, él siguió ciñéndose a la cuestión.

—Supongo que no se le puede considerar uno de los duques.

—No, por Dios… ni mucho menos. Comparado con otros candidatos, no tiene posibilidades. Es cierto que Milly —añadió para ser exacta— no tiene sentido natural de los valores sociales, no entiende lo más mínimo nuestras diferencias ni sabe quién es quién o qué es qué.

—Entiendo. Por eso —se rio Densher— se ha fijado en mí.

—Exacto. No se parece a mí —dijo Kate—, que al menos sé lo que pierdo.

Bueno, todo había adquirido un considerable interés para Densher.

—Y la tía Maud ¿no tendría que haberse dado cuenta? Quiero decir de que tu amigo no vale nada. ¿Acaso cree que vale tanto como un duque?

—Ni muchísimo menos; excepto en el sentido de que es tío de un duque. Sin duda ya es algo. Además, es lo mejor que podemos conseguir.

—¡Ah, ah! —dijo Densher; y sus dudas no eran del todo despectivas.

—No se trata de la *grandeur*[35] de lord Mark —continuó ella sin prestarle atención— porque tal vez en ese sentido, ya que no tiene dinero, algo podría hacerse. Pero ella no es nada sórdida; sólo cuenta con la sordidez de los demás. Además es lo bastante importante, con un duque en la familia. Lo que importa es su inteligencia.

—Y ¿tú crees en eso?

—¿En la inteligencia de lord Mark? —Kate, como si quisiera dar una opinión más definitiva de lo que le

habían preguntado, se tomó un momento para pensarlo. Meditó su respuesta de tal modo que uno no habría sabido qué esperar; pero al final lo resolvió con un elocuente—: ¡Sí!

—¿Para la política?

—Para todo. En cualquier caso no sé —añadió— cómo llamarlo, tratándose de un hombre que es capaz de hacer valer su presencia de una manera tan intensa sin esfuerzo, sin violencia, sin mañas de ningún tipo. Produce un efecto sin que se note lo más mínimo que él es la causa.

—¡Ah!, pero ¿y si el efecto —dijo Densher consciente de su superficialidad— no es agradable?

—¡Oh, pero lo es!

—Sin duda no para todo el mundo.

—Si hablas por ti —respondió Kate—, tus razones tendrás… pero los hombres no contáis. Las mujeres no saben si es agradable o no.

—Pues ¡ya lo ves!

—Sí, precisamente: eso requiere inteligencia por su parte.

Densher esperó como si se preguntara qué parte de lo que con tanta presteza, desenvoltura y sobre todo encanto le exponía habría resultado, en caso de analizarlo, una exigencia. De pronto algo, como después de un último toque decisivo, creció y se desbordó en su interior: la intuición de su buena suerte y de la complejidad de ella, del futuro que le prometía, del interés que le proporcionaba.

—Todas las mujeres, menos tú, son idiotas. ¿Cómo voy a fijarme en otra? Eres diferente y diferente… y luego otra vez diferente. No es raro que la tía Maud tenga tantos planes para ti; sólo que eres demasiado buena para sus planes. Ni siquiera la «sociedad» sabrá lo buena que eres; es demasiado estúpida y tú estás muy por encima. Tendrías que arrastrarla cuesta arriba: eres tú quien estás en la cumbre. Las mujeres que conoce uno ¿qué son sino libros que ya ha leído? Tú eres una biblioteca de libros intonsos y desconocidos. —Casi gimió de dolor por lo profundo de su alegría—. ¡Palabra que estoy suscrito a ella!

Kate lo escuchó y volvió a expresar con su semblante todo lo que tenía que responder, y una vez más volvieron a enfrentarse y unirse en la riqueza esencial de sus vidas.

—Eres tú quien me sostiene. Vivo por ti. No por los demás.

No obstante, fue como si el propio estremecimiento de aquel vínculo oprimiera en él, igual que cualquier felicidad extremada, el agudo resorte del miedo.

—¡Oye, no sé! ¡No… no…!

—No ¿qué?

—No me falles. Me matarías.

Ella lo miró un minuto sin más respuesta que la de sus ojos.

—¿Es que piensas matarme tú antes para evitarlo? —Sonrió, pero un instante después a Densher le pareció que sonreía entre las lágrimas; y dejó a un lado aquella cuestión concreta. Volvió a otro asunto; sus asuntos estaban tan íntimamente relacionados que los de Densher eran como mucho parentéticos. Aun así tenía algo que añadir—: Entonces ¿has entendido lo que tienes que hacer? —le preguntó antes de que fuesen, ya iba siendo hora, con los demás. Y se aseguró de que entendiera que se refería a lo que tenía que hacer con Milly.

Densher se había calmado un poco con la explicación; además le había proporcionado una especie de reconocimiento. Gracias a aquella luz había podido comprender parte de lo que veía, aunque había cierta oscuridad que no se había disipado desde su regreso.

—Hay algo que debes decirme sin falta. Si nuestra amiga sabe que mientras…

Ella corrió en su ayuda y terminó de formular su pregunta, aunque suavizándola.

—¿… que mientras ella y yo nos hacíamos amigas, tú y yo teníamos una relación secreta? Si lo sabe, sí, sabrá que esa relación implicaría por fuerza que me escribieras.

—Y ¿cómo puede suponer que no me contestases?

—No lo supone.

—Pero entonces ¿cómo puede creer que no me hablaras de ella?

—Tampoco lo cree. Sabe que te hablé. Se lo he contado todo. Le he dado razones que permiten explicarlo.

Pese a todo, se quedó pensativo.

—¿Cree todo lo que le cuentas igual que yo?

—Exactamente igual que tú.

—Entonces ¿no es más que otra de tus víctimas?

—Ni más ni menos. Sois una pareja.

—Y, si ocurre algo —preguntó Densher—, ¿podemos consolarnos el uno al otro?

—¡Ay, algo podría pasar —respondió ella— si actúas como es debido!

Él observó un instante a los demás a través de la cristalera.

—¿Qué quieres decir con actuar como es debido?

—No preocuparte. Hacer lo que quieras. Inténtalo, como te he dicho, y ya verás. Siempre podrás consultarme.

—¡Oh, eso espero! Pero ¿y si se marcha?

Kate se quedó cortada un momento.

—Yo haré que vuelva. Ya lo ves. No dirás que no te lo pongo fácil.

Él lo consideró todo, y sin duda era raro. Pero no fue la rareza la que, al cabo de un minuto, prevaleció. Estaba atrapado en una increíble y sedosa telaraña, y era divertido.

—¡Me mimas demasiado!

No supo con seguridad si la señora Lowder, que reapareció en aquel momento, había oído lo que decía; probablemente no, pensó, su atención estaba centrada en la señora Stringham, con quien entró en ese mismo instante y de la cual por fin se estaba despidiendo. Detrás llegaron lord Mark y los demás, pero antes de que el grupo se dispersara ocurrieron dos o tres cosas. Una fue que Kate encontró tiempo para decirle con furtiva insistencia: «¡Tienes que irte ahora mismo!». Otra fue que a continuación se dirigió con toda franqueza a lord Mark, se acercó a él con un «Venga y cuénteme algo» que sonó casi como un reproche; provocación que al cabo de un minuto tuvo el efecto, tal como vio Densher, de que se instalaran juntos en un rincón apartado; aunque no en el mismo donde habían estado ellos. Otra más fue que tuvo la sensación de que la señora Stringham, en la azarosa intensidad de las despedidas, lo miraba con una leve y solemne insinuación, que daba a entender, como él interpretaría más tarde, que si después de la cena hubiese querido hablar con ella la habría encontrado dispuesta. La impresión fue leve, pero le dejó con la intuición de haber pasado algo por alto, desapercibido. Tal vez se acentuase un poco por la leve formalidad del «¡Buenas noches, señor!» que le dedicó al pasar a su lado; no pudo hacer más, por culpa de la diligencia del joven que a estas alturas Densher había considerado incluso más inofensivo que él mismo. Dicho personaje se le adelantó para abrirle la puerta a la señora Stringham y dejó claro —con ulteriores intenciones, podría haber juzgado Densher, respecto a Milly— que pensaba acompañarla hasta el coche. Lo que ocurrió después fue que la tía Maud, después de despedirse de ella, tuvo unas palabras para él. Fue un categórico: «Espere un minuto», con las que al mismo tiempo lo retenía y le despedía; le pedía un minuto, a pesar de que él no le había dado a entender aún que fuese a retirarse.

—Vuelva a ver a nuestra pequeña amiga. La encontrará muy interesante.

—Si se refiere a la señorita Theale —respondió—, desde luego no la olvidaré. Pero debe usted recordar que, en lo que atañe a su «interés», yo la descubrí, yo… como se ha dicho en la cena, la inventé.

—Bueno, cualquiera diría que haya sacado usted la patente. Yo sólo digo que, con la presión de otras cosas, no la descuide demasiado.

Afectado, sorprendido por la coincidencia de su petición con la de Kate, se preguntó a toda prisa si no podría serle de ayuda con ella. En todo caso, podía intentarlo.

—Todos cuidan de mis modales. Es justo, no sé si lo sabe, lo que me ha estado diciendo la señorita Croy. Vela por mí… Tiene mucho que decir sobre este asunto.

Le alegró poder darle a su anfitriona una versión de su charla con Kate, que, al tiempo que veraz, pudiera ser tranquilizadora para ella. Pero la tía Maud, asombrosamente y sin dejar de mirarlo a la cara, se lo tomó como si su confianza se apoyara en otros puntales. Si notó sus intenciones no manifestó ni duda ni aceptación; tan sólo dijo imperturbable:

—Sí, hará cualquier cosa por su amiga; no predica sino lo que hace.

Densher se preguntó si la tía Maud sabía hasta dónde llegaba la devoción de Kate. Además estaba un tanto confundido por esa peculiar armonía; en vista de la cual se preguntó si la señora Lowder habría pensado en la joven norteamericana como una distracción para él, y si el dominio de Kate del asunto no sería por tanto más que pura apariencia destinada a su tía. Lo que pudiera ser de la joven norteamericana era por tanto una cuestión que, en último extremo, no perdería ni un ápice de su carácter peliagudo. De todos modos, las preguntas podían esperar, y, que él supiera, era fácil responder a la señora Lowder.

—En cualquier caso, eso no significa que me resista. La señorita Theale me parece encantadora.

Bueno, era cuanto ella quería.

—Pues no desaproveche la oportunidad.

—Lo malo es —prosiguió él— que, como es natural, se dispone a dejar la ciudad y, según tengo entendido, a partir al extranjero.

La tía Maud pareció haber considerado ya esa dificultad.

—No se irá —sonrió a su pesar— hasta haberle visto a usted. Además, cuando se marche… —hizo una pausa que lo desconcertó. Pero, un instante después, aún lo dejó más perplejo—: Nosotras también iremos.

Densher esbozó una sonrisa que a él mismo le pareció un poco rara.

—Y ¿en qué va ayudarme eso a mí?

—Iremos a algún sitio cerca de ellas, y usted vendrá a visitarnos.

—¡Ah! —exclamó un tanto cortado.

—Yo me encargaré. Quiero decir que le escribiré.

—¡Ah, gracias, gracias! —se rio Merton Densher. La señora Lowder estaba sin duda poniendo a prueba su honorabilidad, y su honorabilidad torció el gesto al ver con cierta impotencia el uso que ella pensaba darle—. Hay muchas cosas —dijo con vaguedad— que tener en cuenta.

—Sin duda. Pero una de ellas es primordial.

—Y ¿cuál es?, si puede saberse.

—Pues la importancia de que no desperdicie usted la ocasión de su vida. Le estoy tratando muy bien, se lo estoy poniendo fácil. Puedo… puedo allanarle el camino. Es encantadora, es inteligente y es buena. Y su fortuna es una auténtica fortuna.

¡Ah, así era la tía Maud! Las piezas encajaron cuando entendió que estaba comprándolo, y comprándolo —habría sido gracioso, de no haber sido tan grave— con el dinero de la señorita Theale. Con desdén, se aventuró a considerarlo una extravagancia.

—Le agradezco mucho su generosa oferta…

—¿De algo que no es mío? —No se dejó amilanar—. No digo que lo sea… pero no hay razón para que no llegue a ser suyo. Piense además —prosiguió— que no soy de las que hablan por hablar. Y está usted en deuda conmigo… si quiere saberlo.

Él notó claramente su presión; sintió, dada su base, su solidez; incluso sintió, hasta cierto punto que enseguida recibió una extraña confirmación, su sinceridad. Lo cierto, en resumidas cuentas, era que lo creía sobornable: una convicción que, también para su inteligencia, iluminó lo imposible. Bajo esa luz ¿por quién lo tenía Kate? Pero no fue eso lo que preguntó en voz alta.

—Por supuesto, sé que debo estarle agradecido por la amabilidad con que me trata. Que me haya invitado esta noche, por ejemplo…

—Sí, que le haya invitado esta noche es parte de ello. Pero ignora —añadió— lo lejos que he llegado por usted.

Él notó que se ruborizaba y tuvo la sensación de que su honor también se sonrojaba; pero se rio como mejor pudo.

—Ya veo hasta dónde llega.

—Soy la mujer más honrada del mundo, pero aun así he hecho lo necesario por usted. —Y luego, como su ominosa solemnidad no obtuvo más respuesta que una mirada atónita, añadió—: Era necesario darle a usted un empujoncito. Y yo tenía cómo hacerlo. —Él siguió mirándola, y ella se sorprendió ante su inexpresividad—. ¿Es que no lo entiende? He contado por usted la mentira perfecta. —Densher seguía sonriendo de una manera forzada; pese a lo cual, hablando con fuerza, como si después de reflexionar un minuto él debiera necesariamente entender de qué le hablaba, la señora Lowder dio media vuelta—. ¡Cuento con que usted me rehabilite!

Por supuesto, cuando se marchó tuvo más libertad para reflexionar un minuto. Anduvo por Bayswater Road, aunque se detuvo bajo las turbias estrellas, delante de la iglesia moderna, en mitad de la plaza que, en dirección este, se abría a su izquierda. Había tenido un breve momento de estupidez, pero en ese momento lo entendió. Ella le había dado garantías a Milly Theale, por medio de la señora Stringham, de que Kate no le quería. Había afirmado, mediante la misma fuente, que el afecto era sólo suyo. Había dicho que Kate era únicamente compasiva, para que Milly también pudiera ser compasiva. Sin duda su mentira había sido la «perfecta»; la más perfecta posible y la más profunda e intensamente diplomática. Así había conseguido engañar a Milly.

V

Densher intuyó enseguida que verla a solas, pobrecilla, equivalía después de todo a verla en las mismas condiciones que antes, las condiciones de sus tres visitas en Nueva York; el nuevo elemento, cuando volviese a estar cara a cara con ella, no equivalía en realidad a mucho más que a reconocer, con cierta sorpresa, el efecto positivo de tales condiciones. Excepto eso todo lo demás, todo lo vergonzoso, desapareció a los cinco minutos de hallarse en su presencia: de hecho fue maravilloso que su excelente, su agradable, su correcta, permitida e inofensiva relación norteamericana —para cuya legitimidad apenas tenía epítetos suficientes— pareciera tan poco perturbada por otras cosas. Desde entonces, los dos habían vivido grandes aventuras; como la aventura que había sido para él su anexión intelectual del país de Milly; y, de momento, era como si la mayor de todas hubiese sido esa conciencia adquirida de unos motivos distintos de los ya expuestos. Densher fue a verla, a su hotel, al día siguiente de la cena en casa de la tía Maud, con la clara, es decir angustiosa, idea preconcebida del papel que debería interpretar con ella, en todos sus encuentros, a raíz de los extrañamente coincidentes y en realidad innecesarios esfuerzos de Kate y la señora Lowder por hacérsela interesante. Ya se lo había parecido sin ellas: y ese día volvió a parecérselo; y, por admirable y hermoso que fuese el caritativo celo de las dos damas, podría haber cortado de raíz el inicio de una amistad por fuerza limitada pero aun así perfectamente posible para él. Lo que había impedido felizmente la necesidad de la ruptura, lo que seguiría impidiéndolo igual de felizmente, eran su propio buen humor y su buen juicio, cierto resorte de su inteligencia que suministraba —con la ayuda de la imaginación— comprensión y tolerancia y que nunca se había alegrado tanto de poseer. Muchos hombres, reflexionó en la práctica, no se lo habrían tomado así, habrían perdido la paciencia, habrían juzgado la petición irracional, exorbitante, y la habrían desestimado sin más, lo que habría hecho imposible cualquier relación posterior con la señorita Theale. Densher había hablado con Kate de que a la joven la estaban «sacrificando», y eso, por su parte, habría sido un modo de sacrificarla. No obstante, ése no había sido el tono en el que sus ideas confusas desde un principio se habían aclarado desde la noche anterior. No era tanto que él no fuese de los que «se amilanan», pues era consciente de ser lo bastante inteligente para identificar las situaciones en las que amilanarse era el mal menor y menos cruel. Era que apreciaba demasiado a todas esas personas que se obstinaban en demostrar que era sencillamente inadmisible. Dios sabe que quería a Kate, y también que apreciaba mucho a la señora Lowder. En particular apreciaba a la propia Milly; y ¿no había reparado la noche anterior en que incluso sentía cierto afecto por Susan Shepherd? En general nunca se había sentido tan compasivo. Era una situación, en cualquier caso, en la que no ingeniárselas para no ofender a nadie sería una torpeza. Si descubría que no podía conseguir su propósito, tenía tiempo de sobra. La idea cristalizó ante sus ojos de tal modo que no sólo prometió mucho interés —sobre todo, en caso de éxito, mucho entusiasmo— sino que prestó cierta apariencia de barbarie al fracaso.

Al llegar a Brook Street con las mejores intenciones y después de dejar conscientemente un margen para cierta incomodidad inicial, descubrió, con gran alivio, que su carga era inesperadamente liviana. La incomodidad que suponía la responsabilidad trazada para él tan recientemente y con tanto ingenio resultó tener un rostro distinto. Era sencillamente el rostro de una antigua impresión, que volvió a sentir de manera plena: la impresión de que las jóvenes norteamericanas, cuando, cosa rara, tenían el atractivo de Milly, eran claramente las personas más accesibles del mundo. ¿Sería que este espécimen de su clase estaba tan acostumbrado a ser accesible que nada podía impedir que lo fuese? En ese momento, le pareció aún más probable que durante el par de horas que en los últimos tiempos había pasado con ella en compañía de Kate. Milly Theale no había visto ninguna complicación, en opinión de Densher, en llevarlo allí, con su amiga, cuando se encontró con ellos en la National Gallery y los invitó a almorzar; era por tanto difícil imaginar que de pronto las complicaciones se hubiesen vuelto insuperables para ella. Por suerte, su pretexto para ir a visitarla no podía ser mejor: lo menos que podía hacer, en nombre de su amistad, era ir a

interesarse por ella después de enterarse de que una indisposición le había impedido asistir a la cena. Y además estaba la feliz circunstancia de la otra invitación: de algún modo debía corresponder a la hospitalidad que había compartido con Kate. Pues bien, en cierto modo, era lo que estaba haciendo; la encontró, para empezar, accesible y muy natural y contenta de verle. Había ido pronto, después de almorzar, aunque no tanto para que ella pudiera no haber salido si estaba bien; y lo estaba y sin embargo seguía en casa. Le pareció oír, al comprobarlo, el comentario que habría hecho Kate; no se le escapó que, según ella, Milly podría haberse quedado en casa porque contaba, después de una conversación con la señora Stringham, con que cierta persona pudiese ir a visitarla. Incluso —hasta ese punto fueron bien las cosas— disfrutó de la libertad de espíritu para celebrar, según ese supuesto, un nuevo indicio de la hermosa hipocresía de las mujeres. Llegó tan lejos como para recrearse en la idea de que la joven tal vez sí se hubiese quedado por él; le ayudó a apreciar su actitud como si no fuera así. Ella expresó justo el grado de sorpresa necesario; no exageró ni lo más mínimo: la lección fue, perceptiblemente, que, si sus últimos encuentros habían abierto la puerta a cualquier falta de naturalidad, podía confiar en que ella se encargaría de subsanarlo por los dos.

Empezó a hacerlo, de manera admirable, nada más entrar él, al apartarse de la mesita en la que al parecer estaba escribiendo unas cartas; lo primero que conjuró fue la posibilidad misma de que él la tratase como una enferma. Nunca, nunca —¿entendía?— sería una enferma para él; y el modo en que él lo entendió, algo en la alegría con que respondió, constituyó, no tardó en darse cuenta, el inicio de una especie de intimidad. Si podían ocurrir cosas así, había que ser igualmente consciente de una relación. Que, en cualquier caso, surgiría muy pronto si no estaba ya establecida. Ella le había dejado preguntar, había habido tiempo para eso, su alusión a las explicaciones dadas por su amiga cuando llegó sola a Lancaster Gate lo hizo inevitable; pero había disipado tanto con su sonrisa como con el brillo de sus ojos, cualquier posible preocupación e insistencia. ¿Que cómo estaba?: pues como él la veía y como ella deseaba estar según sus propias razones, que no incumbían a nadie más que a ella. Densher recordó que Kate había afirmado que Milly era demasiado orgullosa para aceptar la compasión, muy reservada sobre un secreto tan personal; y se alegró de saber captar una indirecta, sobre todo cuando quería. La joven había despachado enseguida su pregunta: «¡Oh, no ha sido nada: estoy bien, gracias!» y él se había alegrado de poder descartarla. Al fin y al cabo, a pesar de lo que dijese Kate, no era asunto suyo; pues habían apelado a su interés en nombre de la compasión, y el nombre de la compasión era justo lo que, en menos de dos minutos, comprendió que no podía susurrar siquiera. Lo habían enviado a verla para que sintiese lástima por ella, y todavía tenía que descubrir la lástima que sentiría cuando estuviese a solas. ¿No significaba eso, no obstante, que apenas sentía ninguna; en tanto que, fuese cual fuese el resultado, no dejaría que ella lo viese? Así se despejó inesperadamente el terreno; aunque hasta que pasó un poco más de tiempo no fue capaz de entender con claridad, al principio divertido y luego con un extraño respeto, lo que había sucedido. De un modo extraordinario y sorprendente, empezó a comprender que, aunque su lástima no había tenido que ceder ante otras cosas, tendría que ceder sin duda ante la de ella. Hasta tal punto habían cambiado las tornas: había hecho esa visita para sentir lástima por ella, pero la repetiría —si es que la repetía— para que ella pudiera sentir lástima por él. Según ella, su situación lo hacía —después de que una le cogiera afecto—, digno de ese grado de ternura: comprendió que era la forma de razonar de la joven, y supo que era algo que en realidad, por dignidad, por pura honradez, pronto tendría que tener en cuenta.

Lo raro fue sin duda que la cuestión original, la cuestión a la que le había obligado a enfrentarse Kate, se viese sustituida de pronto por otra. Esa otra, era fácil darse cuenta, surgía directamente del hecho de la bella ilusión de Milly y de su caridad malgastada; todo lo cual condujo al más claro caso de conciencia que habría podido imaginar, y cuya sola perspectiva ya le hacía torcer el gesto. Si Densher resultaba interesante era porque era infeliz; y si era infeliz era porque su pasión por Kate se consumía en vano; y si Kate parecía indiferente, inexorable, debía habérselo dejado muy claro a Milly. Eso fue lo que pensó por encima de todo: qué impresión tan clara de esa actitud, que explicación tan evidente de su propio fracaso debía haberle dado Kate a su amiga. El siguiente cuarto de hora que pasó con la joven iluminó para él de manera casi cegadora semejante inferencia; era casi como si la otra parte de aquel notable entendimiento hubiese estado presente mientras hablaban, como si se hubiese cernido sobre ellos y se hubiera posado para comprobar su obra. El valor de esa obra le pareció distinto desde el momento en que lo vio expresado así en la pobre Milly. Desde el momento en que era falso que Kate no le amase, él perdía su derecho a dar importancia a semejante circunstancia; y, si no iba con cuidado, podría juzgar erróneamente la buena fe de la benevolencia de Milly. Eso era lo que despertaba sus escrúpulos e incrementaba la necesidad de tener cuidado con lo que hacía. Si no estaba bien que disfrutase de determinada consideración basada en unas circunstancias totalmente falsas, ¿dónde estaba la garantía de que, si seguía adelante, no acabaría fingiendo

el agravio para no tener que renunciar a la recompensa? La consideración —de una joven encantadora— era un alivio se mirase como se mirase; y no tuvo que esforzarse mucho para recordar que él no había hecho aún nada para engañarla. La descripción de Kate, su derrota, no había sido cosa suya; su responsabilidad empezaría, podría decirse, sólo cuando actuase de acuerdo con ella. La clave radicaba, no obstante, en la diferencia entre actuar o no: esa diferencia era lo que lo convertía en un caso de conciencia. Comprendió con cierta preocupación que todo lo que no fuese decir las palabras indicadas sería actuar. «Si le gusto a usted porque cree que ella no me quiere, no es cierto: ¡me quiere con locura!»: ésas habrían sido las palabras, aunque al mismo tiempo fuese evidente que no eran fáciles de pronunciar. ¿No sería confesárselo una falta de delicadeza tan grande como permitir que siguiera engañada? Y eso aparte de que, por así decirlo, dejaría en evidencia a Kate, para quien sería una especie de traición. El plan de Kate era tan extraordinariamente especial para ella que le acobardaron las complicaciones inherentes a juzgarlo. No traicionar a la mujer amada y apoyarla en sus errores —una vez llegados a ciertos extremos— tal vez fuese una de esas cosas inevitables de la abyección del amor. La lealtad por supuesto se imponía de forma suprema ante cualquier plan por su parte que, por sinuoso que fuese, sólo pretendiera el bien de uno.

Densher tuvo que contenerse para no asustarse ante la inmensidad del bien que a todas luces le deseaba su amiga. De momento, estaba seguro de una cosa: Milly Theale no precipitaría la necesidad de que él tuviese que intervenir. Nunca, bajo ningún concepto, le diría: «Entonces, ¿es imposible que ella llegue a quererle a usted?», sin lo cual nada podía ser menos delicado que decirle agresivamente la verdad. Kate podría hacerlo si, llevada por la prudencia, por la contrición, en suma por una razón mejor, reconsiderase su plan; pero él se preguntó qué podría hacer él, en caso contrario, que no fuese al fin peor que nada. Y eso volvió a llevarle a aceptar el hecho de que la pobre joven le tenía afecto. Ella lo expresaba, según sus propias razones, en un terreno bello y sencillo, un terreno que ya le había proporcionado el pretexto que necesitaba. El terreno estaba allí, en la impresión que había recibido, guardado, acariciado; el pretexto, además, era el pretexto para actuar en consecuencia. Que ella lo creyera como lo creía le daba por fin la seguridad de poder actuar; de modo que Densher debía de haber sacudido, en su alma, la raíz de un placer puro. En el rato que pasó con ella, ese placer puro alzó la cabeza y floreció, y hubo cosas que la joven pareció decir que lo dejaron sin palabras. No fue tanto lo que dijo; fue más bien lo que esas cosas significaban a la luz de lo que él sabía. Por ejemplo, la habilidad valiente, breve y delicada con que descartó la cuestión de su salud representó para Densher una verdad que ella no decía. «Para usted estoy bien: es lo único que le interesa o de lo que necesita preocuparse: para usted nunca seré nada tan horrible como una enferma. Así que ya sabe, compadézcame e inquiétese lo menos posible. No tema, en suma, pasar por alto mi faceta “interesante”. No es, ya me entiende, incluso ahora mientras lo tengo aquí delante de mí, que no tenga otras. Bastará con que les haga justicia para que nos llevemos bien». Eso era lo que implícitamente daba a entender su conversación de sus impresiones e intenciones. Intentó que Densher volviera a hablarle de sus andanzas por Norteamérica, pero él no quiso. Recordó la forma en que, la tarde anterior, en compañía de Kate, se había sentado a «disertar», se acusó de excesivo, de haber exagerado y de haber hecho —al menos en apariencia— más el figurón ante su anfitriona de lo que habría querido. Dio la vuelta a las cosas y la animó a ella a hablarle de Londres, de su opinión sobre la vida allí, encantado de tratarla como a una persona con quien se podía hablar de otras cosas que no fuesen sus achaques y sus dolencias. Le habló sobre todo de las pruebas que le habían dado en Lancaster Gate de que había conquistado a todo el mundo; y cuando ella le escuchó con alegre aprobación: —«¿qué puedo hacer para no ser la sensación de la temporada, la, cómo lo llaman ustedes, la comidilla de todos?»— confraternizaron abiertamente sobre lo que les había sucedido a los dos desde su interrumpido encuentro en Nueva York.

Al mismo tiempo, mientras recordaban, sobre todo Densher, muchas cosas en rápida sucesión, tal vez nada les pareciese tan peculiar como la extraña influencia de su presente situación en la pasada. Fue como si no hubiesen reparado en lo «unidos» que habían estado al principio, como si, en cierto modo, recordasen más situaciones íntimas de las que habían tenido tiempo de vivir. Tenían una relación tan intrincada, ya fuese por lo que se decían o por lo que no se decían, que lo mismo podrían haber intentado justificar sus rápidos progresos remontándose a uno de esos períodos fabulosos en los que sitúan sus orígenes las naciones prósperas. Densher recordó lo que se había dicho en casa de la señora Lowder sobre las etapas y fases en la vida de las personas que se pierde uno por la ausencia, y en la frecuente sensación derivada de encontrarlas cambiadas, y se lo contó a Milly junto con otras cosas que acudieron a su memoria. Las cosas que no podía decirle se mezclaron con las que le dijo; por lo que habría sido difícil precisar cuáles desempeñaron un papel más importante. La fuerza que le permitía estar cara a cara con aquella joven emanaba de la peculiar situación de ambos y actuaba, sobre sus nervios, con la rapidez de las fuerzas que las personas sensibles consideran fuera de su control. La corriente así determinada se había convertido para

él, cuando apenas llevaba diez minutos en la sala, en algo que, de no haber sido por el absurdo de comparar lo muy grande con lo muy pequeño, habría equiparado sin dudarlo a los rápidos del Niágara. Una relación libre de críticas entre un joven inteligente y una mujer joven y sensible no podía hacer otra cosa que avanzar, y el experimento avanzaba y avanzaba y avanzaba. Probablemente, nada lo empujara tanto a avanzar como la notable circunstancia de que en todo ese rato no hubiesen dicho una palabra sobre Kate; y eso a pesar del hecho de que, de todo lo que les había acontecido las últimas semanas, no había nada comparable al predominio de Kate. Justo la noche anterior Densher le había pedido instrucciones sobre cómo tratar a Milly, pero casi torció el gesto al comprobar de qué poco le habían servido. Por supuesto, ella se lo había advertido, pero le pareció distinto una vez se lo confirmó la joven norteamericana. Era la prueba de que había tenido éxito, pero también le hizo pensar que tal vez valiera la pena volver a preguntarle a Kate. Le habría gustado hablar con ella antes de seguir adelante: asegurarse de que realmente quería que triunfase tanto. Entre todas las diferencias que, como decimos, notó, cayó también, como es lógico, en que podía hacer que su visita fuese breve y no volver a repetirla; sin embargo, lo más raro fue que el argumento contra esa posibilidad surgiese precisamente de la encantadora y delicada elocuencia con que Milly evitaba hablar de ciertas cosas.

Bien podía ser que eso fuese precipitado, puesto que subrayaba el hecho de que la joven actuaba según las precauciones que había adoptado. Era evidente que no había dudado de estas últimas, pues ¿acaso no habían tenido el mérito de ofrecerle una oportunidad? Densher lo notó, intuyó que aceptaba, ni más ni menos, la oportunidad de ayudarle libremente. Era lo que Kate le había dado entender con su «¿Escucharlo, yo? ¡Nunca! Tú haz lo que quieras». Lo que Milly «quería» era, o eso parecía, lo que estaba haciendo: y al vislumbrarlo nuestro joven vislumbró también la particular brutalidad que habría supuesto abandonarla. La elección de Milly exhalaba una tímida fragancia de heroísmo, pues no entraba en sus planes romper con Kate. Sería tan encantadora con Kate como con el adorador de Kate, soportaría el sufrimiento de ver —si es que seguía viéndolo— al adorador en brazos de la adorada. En realidad no habría hecho falta mucho más para hacerle dudar de si no se hallaría ante uno de esos raros casos de exaltación —pasto para la novela, pasto para la poesía— en que una mujer que ama a un hombre lo ayuda a triunfar con la mujer que no lo ama. Era como si Milly se hubiese dicho: «Bueno, si le sirve de algo, al menos puede verla en mi compañía; así que lo que haré será esforzarme para que mi compañía resulte agradable». Desde luego no habría dado una impresión distinta si ése hubiese sido su razonamiento. Todo lo cual, no obstante, no impidió que él le dijera poco después, como si estuviera a punto de ser lanzada al espacio:

—Y ahora, entonces, ¿qué será de usted? ¿Va a empezar a ir de casa de campo en casa de campo?

Ella rechazó la idea con un movimiento de cabeza que reveló, a pesar de su gesto, que se negaba a considerar siquiera la posibilidad —tal vez para siempre, siempre— de semejante proceder. En todo caso, de momento, eso no era para ella.

—¡Oh, no! Nos iremos unas semanas al extranjero a respirar aire puro. Llevamos muchos días planificándolo; sólo nos hemos quedado porque había que ultimar unos detalles. Pero ya está todo resuelto y tenemos el viento a favor.

—¡Ojalá tenga, pues, una feliz travesía! Pero ¿cuándo —preguntó— piensa regresar?

Ella pareció adoptar una expresión más vaga que nunca; luego, como para corregirse, respondió:

—¡Oh, cuando cambie el viento! Y ¿cómo va a pasar usted el verano?

—¡Ay!, dedicado a sórdidas ocupaciones. Empapado en tinta mercenaria. Mi trabajo en Estados Unidos cuenta como una diversión. Ya ve la idea que se tiene aquí de los placeres que puede procurar su país. Mis vacaciones han terminado.

—Siento que haya tenido que tomárselas —respondió Milly— en época distinta a las nuestras. Ojalá hubiese podido trabajar mientras trabajábamos nosotras…

—¿Para poder divertirme mientras ustedes se divierten? ¡Oh!, para mí las dos cosas tienen su parte de trabajo y de diversión. Pero a usted y a la señora Stringham, a la señorita Croy y a la señora Lowder, a todos ustedes —prosiguió— les ha tocado en suerte, como a los jornaleros y los esclavos negros, el verdadero trabajo físico. Se han ganado un buen descanso. En comparación mi trabajo es muy poco fatigoso.

—Cierto —sonrió ella—; pero aun así me gusta lo que hago.

—¿No la deja a usted exhausta?

—Ni mucho menos. Cuando algo me interesa no me cansa. Podría seguir indefinidamente.

Él se quedó pensativo.

—Y ¿por qué no lo hace? Por lo que me han contado, desde que llegó, tiene a la ciudad en el bolsillo.

—Bueno, es por economía: estoy ahorrando. He disfrutado tanto de eso que dice, aunque lo cuente de

manera un tanto fantasiosa, que quiero que dure, y no puedo evitar preocuparme y angustiarme. No quiero, por lo que me han dado y aún puedo tener, cometer ningún error estúpido. La forma de no hacerlo es tomar distancia y reconsiderar la situación desde lejos. Quiero que conserve su lozanía —concluyó, como satisfecha por la ingenuidad de su afirmación—. Si soy prudente, todo seguirá fresco a mi regreso.

—¡Ah!, entonces ¿volverá? ¿Lo promete?

Su rostro se iluminó un poco cuando le pidió esa promesa; pero fingió resistirse.

—¿No es Londres un poco espantoso en invierno?

Estuvo a punto de preguntarle si quería decir para los enfermos; pero cayó en que habría sido inoportuno y respondió como si lo hubiese dicho por la vida social.

—No… entre unas cosas y otras, a mí me gusta; no hay tanta gente como después; y para nosotros tendría el aliciente —si viniese usted— de que probablemente la veríamos más. Así que tenga la bondad de volver, siempre que no sea el clima…

Ella lo miró un poco más seria.

—Que no sea el clima ¿qué?

—Lo que determina sus movimientos. Acaba de decir que iba a ir no sé dónde por eso.

—¿Por el aire puro? —recordó—. ¡Ah, sí! Desde luego una prefiere marcharse de Londres en agosto.

—Claro, ¡por supuesto! —él lo entendió a la perfección—. Aunque me alegro de que se haya retrasado lo bastante para que hayamos podido vernos. En todo caso pónganos a prueba —continuó— una vez más.

—¿Qué quiere decir con eso de «pónganos»? —preguntó ella.

Él se quedó cortado un instante, pues comprendió que había parecido una alusión a Kate, y se había propuesto no sacar a colación su nombre si no lo hacía su anfitriona.

—A todos, a la gente que encontrará dispuesta a acogerla con sentimiento.

No obstante, eso la impulsó a ella a volver a preguntarle a su manera extraña y encantadora.

—¿Por qué con sentimiento?

—Bueno, sin duda me he quedado corto. Lo que sentiremos por usted se acercará más a la adoración.

—Pues ¡acérquense cuanto quieran! —Así salió por fin a relucir el nombre de Kate—. Usted conoce a las personas por las que volvería. Lo haría por la señora Lowder, que ha sido tan amable conmigo.

—Y conmigo —dijo Densher—. Tengo la sensación —añadió, al ver que ella no decía nada— de que, al contrario de lo que esperaba, nos hemos hecho amigos.

—Yo tampoco esperaba… que salieran así las cosas. Pero es lo que ha pasado con Kate —dijo Milly—. Volveré también por ella. Haría cualquier cosa por Kate —insistió.

Mientras hablaba, lo miró con una especie de consciente clarividencia y podría haber tendido eficazmente una trampa para que lo poco que le quedase de lealtad ideal tuviese oportunidad de actuar. Después, Densher se diría que en ese momento algo había pendido de un hilo. Había pendido de un hilo que dijese: «¡Oh, ya sé lo que haría uno por Kate!», pero se lo impidió un elemento aún más fuerte de su conciencia. La prueba de la verdad en cuestión radicaba precisamente en su silencio: en que se estaba resistiendo al impulso de contarle lo que en realidad estaba haciendo él por Kate. Todo ocurrió muy deprisa: un instante después, estaba intentando facilitarle las cosas a Milly.

—Por supuesto, ya sé que son muy amigas… y, por supuesto, entiendo —se permitió añadir— semejante devoción por una persona tan encantadora. Éste será el favor que nos haga a todos: contribuir a que vuelva usted.

—¡Oh!, no sabe hasta qué punto —respondió Milly— estoy realmente en sus manos.

Densher no pudo sino dejar traslucir que se estaba preguntando hasta qué punto debía aparentar que lo sabía.

—¡Ah, es muy dominante!

—¡Es estupenda! Pero no digo que me intimide.

—No… ésa no es la manera. Al menos en su caso —esbozó una sonrisa. Recordó entonces, no obstante, que no debía demostrar un conocimiento excesivo de la manera de actuar de Kate; y se limitó a señalar con buena intención, que además tenía el mérito de ser cierta—: La verdad es que, lo que se dice conocerla, no creo conocerla.

—¡Bueno, puestos a eso, yo tampoco! —se rio ella.

En cuanto pronunció estas palabras, Densher comprendió su propia responsabilidad, aunque en el minuto de silencio que siguió tuvo tiempo de reparar en que, al fin y al cabo no había ahí ningún elemento de falsedad. Lo raro era que pudiese haber llegado tan lejos —si es que había llegado lejos— sin ser falso. Podría haberle hecho esa misma observación a la propia Kate. Y antes de volver a hablar, y de que hablase la propia Milly, tuvo tiempo para más: para comprender que justo ahí era donde debía parar si de verdad

estaba decidido a no ir más allá. Fue como si se encontrase en una esquina —donde lo habían puesto además sus últimas palabras— y dependiera de él doblarla o no. El silencio, aunque se hubiese prolongado sólo un instante, podría incluso haberle dado la sensación de que ella estaba esperando a ver lo que hacía. Justo después lo distrajo el ruido, bastante voluminoso para la tarde de agosto, de la aproximación, por la calle de abajo, de unas ruedas de carruaje y unos caballos entrenados para andar «al paso». Un rumor, una sacudida, una trápala considerable se vieron reemplazados al parecer por una pausa delante de la puerta del hotel, que fue acompañada de la correspondiente exhibición de piafados y resoplidos al refrenar los animales.

—Tiene usted visita —se rio Densher— y ¡como mínimo debe ser un embajador!

—Es mi coche; ¿no es estupendo?, todos los días hace lo mismo. A la señora Stringham y a mí, tontas de nosotras, nos parece muy divertido. —Se había levantado al decirlo, para asegurarse; y los dos se asomaron al balcón y contemplaron la carroza, que sin duda resultaba imponente—. ¿Es muy horrible?

A Densher sólo le pareció —aparte de su absurdo tamaño— agradablemente pomposa.

—Es una delicia rococó. Pero ¿quién soy yo para decirlo? Es usted quien entiende de estas cosas con su gran sabiduría. Además, disfruta usted de una posición que a los ojos de Londres se contagia a su carruaje.

Pero eso significaba que ella iba a salir y Densher no quiso entrometerse. Un instante después ocurrió, en primer lugar, que ella negó que fuese a salir, para que él pudiera quedarse más tiempo; y, en segundo, que Milly afirmó que saldría de buen grado si a él le apetecía dar un paseo en coche; que, de hecho, siempre tenía cosas que hacer, y que por eso, en suma, había pedido el coche tan temprano. Mientras hablaban repararon en que alguien había entrado en la sala, y cuando regresaron a ella vieron al criado de Milly que anunciaba la llegada del coche y se mostraba dispuesto a acompañarla. Eso pareció tener para ella el efecto de resolver la cuestión; siempre, claro, que Densher aceptara su propuesta. No obstante, Densher no respondió, pues el proceso que hemos descrito obró en él con extremada intensidad. La estrategia de no contenerse, de no marcharse, lo había llevado a la situación en que se encontraba, pensó; y ahora en represalia tendría que hacer una cosa o la otra. Había estado esperando un momento, que probablemente le pareciese más largo de lo que fue; porque contemplaba angustiado su propia espera. No podía seguir así indefinidamente; y, puesto que tenía que hacer una cosa o la otra, pronto fue consciente de haber elegido la otra. Si había estado a la deriva encalló en cierto modo tras un golpe de considerable violencia contra un objeto duro del fondo.

—¡Oh, sí, la acompañaré encantado! Es una idea estupenda.

Ella no lo miró para agradecérselo: más bien apartó la mirada; se limitó a decirle al criado: «En diez minutos», y luego a su visitante, cuando salió aquél:

—Iremos a alguna parte: me apetece. Pero debo pedirle que me dé tiempo —el menos posible— para arreglarme. —Miró la sala buscando algo con lo que entretenerlo—. Hay libros y cosas, muchas; y me visto muy deprisa.

Él le vio los ojos cuando salía, y pensó que eran hermosos y cautivadores.

Por qué especialmente cautivadores no habría sabido decirlo en ese momento; estaba implícito y perdido en la impresión de que Milly quería complacerle. Estaba claro que lo que había ocurrido era que a ella le apetecía tanto que había hecho que a él le apeteciera, por pura cortesía, complacerla. Ya había doblado su esquina cuando la puerta se cerró y se quedó allí solo. Estuvo solo tres minutos más… con muchas pequeñas cosas en las que pensar. Una de ellas era el fenómeno —típica y notablemente norteamericano, habría dicho él— de la extremada espontaneidad de Milly. Se sintió como si hubiese buscado refugio —refugio de otra cosa— en la contemplación casi exclusiva de esa peculiaridad. Sin embargo, eso, a su manera, no lo llevó a ninguna parte; ni siquiera a una sensata generalización sobre las jóvenes norteamericanas. Era espontáneo por parte de su joven amiga que lo hubiese invitado a dar un paseo con ella sola en coche, pues no había hablado de su compañera; pero a fin de cuentas no le pareció más avanzada de lo que, por ejemplo, le habría parecido Kate, que no era norteamericana, si no lo hubiese invitado. Además, Kate le habría invitado, aunque no era nada espontánea, en el sentido en que lo era Milly. Y, además, Kate lo había hecho, o al menos cosas parecidas. Además, estaba comprometido con Kate, aunque no estarlo públicamente daba otro sentido a su libertad. En todo caso, la relación entre Kate y la libertad, entre la libertad y Kate, era distinta de cualquiera que él pudiera asociar, cultivar, con la joven que acababa de salir para prepararse y entregarse a él. Nunca se le había ocurrido antes, y estuvo deambulando por la sala mientras lo pensaba, sin tocar ninguno de los libros que tenía a su disposición. Podía decirse que Milly era lanzada, pero no avanzada; mientras que Kate era tímida —incluso, en comparación, para ser inglesa— y no obstante muy avanzada. No obstante —aunque eso no aclaraba las cosas—. Kate era, por supuesto, dos o tres años mayor; y a esa edad suponía una gran diferencia.

Discriminando con tanto ingenio, Densher siguió deambulando muy despacio; aunque sin quitarse de encima la sensación de que había doblado la esquina. Hasta tal punto lo había hecho que ni siquiera creyó tener la opción de aprovechar la ausencia de Milly para retroceder. Aunque, cinco minutos antes, habría podido poner pies en polvorosa, por decirlo vulgarmente, ahora no podía; debía limitarse a esperar con la copa de la conciencia llena hasta el borde. Además, enseguida se resolvió la cuestión; tres minutos después, reapareció el criado de la señorita Theale. Precedía a una visita con la que, obviamente, se había encontrado al pie de la escalera y a la que, después de abrir la puerta, anunció ruidosamente como señorita Croy. Kate le siguió y se detuvo al ver a Densher… aunque no, como el joven observó divertido, sorprendida y mucho menos incómoda. Densher se explicó enseguida —la señorita Theale había salido a prepararse para ir a dar un paseo— mientras el criado se volatilizaba.

—Y ¿vas a ir con ella? —preguntó Kate.

—Sí… con tu consentimiento; que, como ves, he dado por supuesto.

—¡Ah —se rio ella— tienes mi total consentimiento! —No pudo ser más lógica ni más generosa.

—Estoy hablando, claro —prosiguió él, claramente afectado por su desenfado—, de tu obstinada instigación.

Ella había observado la sala: puede que buscara vagamente indicios de la duración, del carácter de su visita, para tener una ayuda momentánea antes de tomar una decisión.

—Pues llámalo instigación, como quieras. —Actuaba como si el éxito de su petición le pareciera divertida; hizo otra broma a propósito de eso—. ¿Tan lejos habéis llegado? ¿Sabes que creo que no voy a esperar?

—¿No vas a verla… después de haber venido?

—¡Bueno, contigo por aquí…! He venido a preguntar por ella, pero debe encontrarse bien. Si está…

Pero él la interrumpió:

—¡Ah! Y ¿cómo puedo saberlo? —Se sintió obligado a decir algo más—. No soy yo el responsable de ella, cariño. Creo que lo eres tú. —Le pareció que Kate se tomaba muy a la ligera un asunto que a él le había costado muchos escrúpulos: y los dos no podían tener razón. O ella era demasiado frívola o él se preocupaba demasiado. En cualquier caso no quería sentirse como un idiota—. No he hecho nada, y te aseguro que no haré más que lo que me digas.

Sus ojos se encontraron con cierta intensidad ante la intensidad de estas palabras; y un instante después comprendió que en realidad no había por qué ponerse así. ¿Qué demonios pasaba? Le preguntó, interesada, como toda respuesta.

—Si puede recibirte… ¿no significa eso que se encuentra mejor?

—Me ha dicho que goza de una salud excelente.

El interés de Kate aumentó.

—Sabía que lo haría —después añadió—. En realidad, anoche no se quedó en el hotel porque estuviese enferma.

—Entonces ¿por qué?

—Bueno… por nerviosismo.

—Nerviosismo ¿por qué?

—¡Oh, ya sabes! —Habló con una pizca de impaciencia, aunque enseguida volvió a sonreír—. Ya te lo he contado.

Él la miró y volvió a ver en su rostro lo que le había contado; luego fue como si lo que veía le impulsara a preguntar:

—¿Qué le has contado a ella?

Kate respondió con su sonrisa controlada, y fue como si recordaran dónde se encontraban, expuestos a que los sorprendieran, hablando en voz baja, incluso aprovechando la oportunidad, con dicha conversación, más allá de lo decoroso. ¡La alcoba de Milly debía de estar cerca, y aun así estaban diciendo unas cosas…! Por un momento, no obstante, continuaron:

—Pregúntaselo, si quieres; eres libre… Ella te lo dirá. Actúa como mejor te parezca; no te preocupes por lo que creas que podría decir o no decir yo. Me llevo muy bien con ella —insistió Kate—. Así que ya sabes.

—Si lo que estás diciendo es que sé lo que hago —respondió él—, no cabe duda. Si insinúas también que sólo tengo que preocuparme de su confianza en ti tienes razón, pues desde luego confía en ti.

—Bueno, pues sigue su ejemplo.

—En realidad lo hace por ti —continuó Densher—. Va a salir a pasear conmigo por ti.

—En tal caso —dijo Kate con su suave tranquilidad—, tú puedes hacerlo un poco por ella. No me asusta —añadió con una sonrisa.

Él se quedó allí un momento, observando la expresión de su rostro y volvió a dejarse afectar, como le ocurría a menudo, por más cosas en ese semblante, así como en su presencia y su figura, de las que, para alivio suyo, habría sido capaz de expresar con palabras. Tales impresiones no eran cuestión de palabras.

—No hago nada por nadie excepto por ti. Pero por ti haré cualquier cosa.

—Bien, bien —respondió Kate—. Así me gusta.

Densher volvió a esperar un instante.

—Entonces ¿lo juras?

—¿Que si lo juro? ¿Qué?

—Pues que te gusto. Sólo por eso dejo que hagas conmigo… en fin, Dios sabe qué.

Ella lo miró con un gesto de desánimo, cuyo significado expresó enseguida.

—Si no crees en mí, ¿no te convendría romper, antes de ir más lejos?

—¿Romper contigo?

—Romper con Milly. Puedes marcharte —dijo— y yo me quedaré a explicarle los motivos.

Dudó, como sorprendido.

—¿Qué le dirías?

—Pues que te has dado cuenta de que no la soportas, y que a mí no me queda más remedio que aguantar como pueda.

Lo meditó.

—¿Le hablas muy mal de mí?

—Justo lo necesario. Como habrás notado por su actitud.

Una vez más volvió a quedarse pensativo.

—No me parece que tenga que preocuparme por su actitud.

—Bueno, pues haz lo que quieras. Yo me quedaré e intentaré defenderte.

Vio que era sincera, que de verdad le estaba dando una oportunidad; y que eso en sí mismo aclaraba las cosas. La sensación de lo lejos que había llegado volvió a embargarlo no con arrepentimiento, sino con esa misma visión de una escapatoria; y no sopesó las consecuencias de lo que había hecho, sino de lo que Kate le ofrecía.

—Y, si no me encuentra aquí, ¿no se convencerá aún más de que hay algo entre nosotros?

Kate se paró a pensarlo.

—Oh, no lo creo. Por supuesto, se llevará un buen disgusto. Pero no te preocupes. No se morirá por eso.

—¿Quieres decir que se va a morir de todos modos? —preguntó enseguida Densher.

—No me hagas preguntas si no crees lo que digo. Pones demasiadas condiciones.

Hablaba con un tono de fatiga racional que daba a su propia falta de flexibilidad, su incapacidad de contentarla, un aspecto insuficiente y feo; por lo que recordó de pronto que le faltaban esas cosas de las que a cualquier hombre sensible, tan comprometido, tan implicado, le habría gustado hacer gala: imaginación, tacto y desde luego incluso humor. La circunstancia sin duda es rara, pero la verdad es pese a todo que lo que más le preocupaba en ese trance era: «¿Y si empiezo a parecerle aburrido a esta criatura?». Y, al cabo de unos segundos, se tradujo en:

—¡Si vuelves a jurar que me quieres…!

Ella miró hacia la puerta y la ventana, como si le estuviese pidiendo más de lo que decía.

—¿Aquí? Aquí no hay nada entre nosotros —dijo con una sonrisa.

—¿Ah, no? —La sonrisa misma le produjo tal efecto que corrió implorante a su lado con las manos extendidas, y ella las estrechó entre las suyas como si quisiera contenerlo y sujetarlo al mismo tiempo. Sujetándolo así un minuto fue como lo contuvo; lo sostuvo el tiempo suficiente, mientras se miraban a los ojos profundamente y esperaban en silencio a que se recuperase y recobrase la discreción. Él se ruborizó como haciéndose cargo de dónde se hallaban, y eso le brindó a ella una de sus victorias habituales, que adoptó inmediatamente otra forma. Cuando le soltó las manos fue para tomar, por así decirlo, las de Milly. En todo caso no era con Milly con quien había roto—. Haré todo lo que quieras —declaró como agradeciéndole que aceptara su condición, que en la práctica había impuesto ella.

Kate volvió a su idea inicial y enseguida obró en consecuencia.

—Si eres tan bueno para hacer eso, me voy. Dile que, al ver que estabas tú, no he querido esperar. Díselo, ya sabes, como si fuese cosa tuya. Ella entenderá.

Había llegado a la puerta; estaba muy decidida, pero antes de que se fuese le embargó una última duda.

—No veo cómo puede entender tanto sin entender demasiado.

—Ni falta que hace.

Entonces le pidió una última aclaración:

—¿Debo seguir sencillamente a ciegas?

—Debes ser sencillamente amable con ella.

—¿Y dejar que tú te ocupes de lo demás?

—Dejar que ella se ocupe de lo demás —dijo Kate, y se marchó.

Todo se reducía, una vez más, a lo mismo que antes. Milly, tres minutos después de que se fuese Kate, regresó engalanada: su gran sombrero negro, tan poco supersticiosamente a la moda, su delicado vestido completamente negro, la tela que le envolvía el cuello, que Densher tomó vagamente por infinitos metros de valioso encaje, y que, con el tejido sujeto por gruesas hileras de perlas, pendía hasta sus pies como la túnica de una sacerdotisa. Enseguida le habló de la visita y la huida de su amiga.

—No contaba con encontrarme aquí —dijo; y lo dijo sin dificultad. Había doblado la esquina y ya no era cuestión de una palabra más o menos.

Ella dio por suficiente esta explicación; pasaba por alto cualquier cosa que pudiera incomodarlos.

—Lo lamento… aunque, por supuesto, la veo muy a menudo.

Él se lo tomó como una discriminación a su favor que al mismo tiempo justificaba a Kate. Ésta era la manera de actuar de Milly cuando dejaban las cosas en sus manos. Bueno, ahora las dejarían del todo en sus manos.

Libro VII

I

Cuando Kate y Densher la dejaron con la señora Stringham el día que los encontró juntos y los invitó a almorzar en su hotel, Milly, cara a cara con su compañera, había tenido uno de esos momentos en los que presto, ansioso, el luchador de la batalla de la vida, como para asegurarse de que tiene la espada a su lado, se lleva la mano al objeto donde reside su valor. Ella se llevó la suya firmemente al corazón y las dos mujeres se quedaron mirándose con un gesto extraño. Susan Shepherd había recibido la visita del famoso médico, lo cual estaba claro que no había sido poca cosa para ella; pero después Milly, había levantado, con insistencia, contra la comunicación y la deslealtad, tal como confesó ahora, la barrera de sus invitados.

—Has sido encantadora. A pesar de lo que me consta que te preocupa, los has tratado muy bien. ¿No te parece que, cuando quiere, Kate es encantadora? —El semblante de la pobre Susie, tenso al principio, como si se debatiera entre espasmos con diferentes peligros, se había relajado por fin. Tuvo que hacer un esfuerzo por llegar a un punto tan remoto ya en el espacio.

—¿La señorita Croy? ¡Ah, ha sido muy amable e inteligente! Lo ha notado —añadió la señora Stringham —. Lo ha notado.

Milly se preparó, aun siendo consciente sobre todo, por el momento, de la gran compasión que le inspiraba su amiga. Comprendió que combatía, con toda su naturaleza, contra la traición de la lástima, que en sí misma, dada su naturaleza, sólo podía ser una tortura. Milly dedujo de esa pugna lo intensa que era su lástima y que la señora Stringham sufría tanto en su ternura como en su conciencia. Lo hermoso y lo extraordinario fue que esa sensación sirviera para infundirle ánimos a la joven. Después de preguntarse apesadumbrada sobre qué base, una vez retirada la barrera, podrían estar juntas, sintió que podía responder con un alivio que casi era alegría. El fundamento, el fundamento inevitable, era que iba a compadecer a Susie, que, según todos los indicios, había sido condenada de forma mucho más incómoda a compadecerse de ella. El pesar de la señora Stringham haría sufrir a la señora Stringham, pero ¿cómo iba a hacer sufrir a nadie el suyo? La pobre joven tuvo, en cualquier caso, en ese momento, cinco minutos de exaltación en los que intercambió los papeles con su amiga con un pase de manos, un gesto de una energía que creó una corriente de aire.

—¿Kate ha notado que estabas preocupada por la visita de *sir* Luke Strett? —preguntó.

—No dijo nada, pero fue amable y considerada; como si quisiera consolarme. —No obstante, apenas decir eso la buena mujer pareció atragantarse. Miró a Milly con valor fingido—. Lo que digo es que reparó en que estaba preocupada. Más que notarlo, lo adivinó. —Su gesto, a su manera, también fue heroico—. Pero ella no importa, Milly.

La joven tuvo la sensación de que a estas alturas podía hacer frente a cualquier cosa.

—Nadie importa, Susie. Nadie. —Algo que, no obstante, contradijeron sus siguientes palabras—. ¿Se tomó mal *sir* Luke que yo no estuviese? ¿No era lo que quería, poder explayarse, más fácilmente, contigo?

—No se «explayó», Milly —dijo con voz trémula y delicada la señora Stringham.

—¿No se quedó prendado de ti —prosiguió Milly— y no juzgó que eres la persona más encantadora en quien yo podía delegar? ¿No congeniasteis enormemente y de hecho os enamorasteis, por lo que fue una enorme ventaja contar conmigo como vínculo en común? Ya veo que me vais a utilizar lo más posible.

—¡Mi niña, mi niña! —murmuró implorante la señora Stringham; aunque dejando entrever que temía incluso los efectos de sus súplicas.

—¿No es apuesto y bondadoso? y, a pesar de lo que pueda decir, ¿no te ha encantado conocerlo? Ahora comprendo que sois las personas idóneas para mí; y ¿sabes lo único que tenéis que hacer? —como Susie se limitó a mirarla atónita y a hacer un esfuerzo por contenerse, añadió—: ayudarme. De la manera que queráis. Decididla juntos. Por mi parte, también seré encantadora, y seremos, nosotros tres y quienquiera que haga falta, ¡quienes vosotros queráis!, un regalo para la vista. Seré tan liviana como una pluma. —Susie

guardó un silencio tan profundo que a su joven amiga casi le pareció, y apenas pudo callar la observación, que se tomaba sus palabras como «un síntoma más de la enfermedad». Eso ayudó a Milly a ser, según juzgó ella, clara y sabia—. En cualquier caso, es un hombre muy interesante, ¿verdad? Tanto mejor. Al menos no hemos dado, como muy bien habría podido sucedernos, por el modo en que lo encontramos, con un pesado.

—¿Interesante, querida? —la señora Stringham creyó pisar un terreno más sólido—. No sé si es interesante o no; lo que sí sé —continuó hablando con voz trémula— es que está todo lo interesado que podrías desear.

—Desde luego… es cierto. Como todo el mundo.

—No, cariño, como todo el mundo no. Con mucha más comprensión e inteligencia.

—Pues ¡ya lo ves! —se rio Milly—. Así es como quiero verte, Susie. Animada. Pasaremos muy buenos ratos con él. No te preocupes.

—No me preocupo, Milly. —Y el semblante de la pobre Susie reflejó la sublimidad de su mentira.

Fue entonces cuando su compañera, profundamente dominada por la emoción, corrió hacia ella y le dio un abrazo en el que se dijeron cosas que iban más allá de las palabras. Las dos se abrazaron como para consolarse de esa desdicha innombrada, la desdicha de la señora Stringham de conocer la tortura de la impotencia, la desdicha de Milly de tener que preocuparse por ella en semejantes circunstancias. Lo que Milly suponía era una enormidad, y la dificultad para su amiga radicaba en no poder contradecirla sin presentar como prueba nada más que lo que permitían la ternura y la imprecisión. Nada, de hecho, quedó demostrado, excepto que podían abrazarse de aquel modo; y, desde luego que, como hemos indicado, el compromiso de proteger y apoyar lo suscribió sólo la más joven de las dos.

—No te pregunto —dijo enseguida— lo que te ha dicho, ni lo que te ha pedido que me digas, ni cómo se tomó en realidad que te dejara con él, ni lo que hablasteis de mí. Si lo dispuse para que os vieseis a solas no fue para enterarme después por mediación tuya: hay cosas que no quiero saber. Ya tendré ocasión de verlo y de saber más de lo que necesito. Lo único que quiero es que me ayudes apoyándote en él: y que él te enseñe el modo. En fin, que te lo pondré fácil; lo haré de tal manera que la mitad de las veces ni siquiera te darás cuenta. Y para eso tienes que confiar en mí. Nada más. Estamos de acuerdo. Nos ayudaremos mutuamente, y puedes estar segura de que no me rendiré. Así que ¿cómo ibas a estar más segura si no tienes que temer siquiera que te den un codazo?

—Me dijo que puedo ayudarte… por supuesto —se apresuró a responder Susie—. ¿Por qué no iba a hacerlo, y para qué he venido si no? Pero no me dijo nada horrible: nada, nada, nada —insistió enérgica la pobre señora—. Sólo que tienes que hacer lo que te guste y seguir sus instrucciones: que consisten, sencillamente, en hacer lo que te guste.

—No debo irme muy lejos. De vez en cuando debo ir a verle. Pero, claro, eso también es hacer lo que me gusta. Es una suerte —añadió con una sonrisa— que me guste ir a verle.

La señora Stringham estuvo de acuerdo; se esforzó por encontrar la versión más aceptable de sus circunstancias.

—Para mí será delicioso y lo que estoy segura que quiere de mí: que te ayude a hacer lo que te guste.

—Y también —se burló Milly— que me protejas un poco de las consecuencias, ¿no? Claro que antes tendré que averiguar qué es lo que me gusta —añadió.

—¡Oh! Algo encontrarás —dijo la señora Stringham con valentía—. Creo que ya hay algunas cosas, como por ejemplo ésta. Quiero decir —explicó—, que estemos así.

Milly reflexionó.

—¿Como si quisiera que estuvieses a gusto con él, y él lo mismo contigo? Sí… eso me gustará.

Susan Shepherd pareció un tanto confundida.

—¿De cuál de los dos estás hablando?

Milly vaciló un instante y luego lo entendió.

—No hablo del señor Densher. —Y la idea pareció divertirle—. Aunque si también te sientes cómoda con él, tanto mejor.

—¡Ah! ¿Te referías a *sir* Luke Strett? Sin duda es muy distinguido. ¿Sabes —prosiguió Susie— a quién me recuerda? A nuestra propia eminencia: al doctor Buttrick de Boston.

Milly recordaba al doctor Buttrick de Boston, pero lo descartó después de una pausa respetuosa.

—Y ¿qué opinas, ahora que lo has visto, del señor Densher?

Hasta después de mucho considerarlo, sin apartar los ojos de los de su amiga, Susie no respondió:

—Creo que es muy apuesto.

Milly siguió sonriéndole, aunque adoptó un poco la actitud de un maestro con su alumno.

—Bueno, con eso bastará para empezar. He hecho —prosiguió— lo que quería.

—Pues eso es lo que queremos todos. Ya ves que hay muchas cosas.

Milly negó con la cabeza al oír lo de «muchas».

—Lo mejor es no saberlo… Eso las incluye todas. No… no sé. Nada de nada… sólo que estás conmigo. Recuérdalo, por favor. Por mi parte, no olvidaré nada tuyo. Así todo irá bien.

El efecto fue, como pretendía, animar a Susie, que, a pesar de sí misma, intentó tranquilizarla.

—Sin duda es lo mejor. Creo que tendrías que entender que él no ve razón para…

—¿Para que no viva muchos años? —Milly terminó la frase, como para comprenderla y considerarla un momento. Pero la despachó de otro modo—. ¡Oh!, claro, ya lo sé.

Lo dijo como si los argumentos de su amiga no tuviesen mayor importancia.

La señora Stringham intentó darles alguna.

—Bueno, lo que quiero decir es que no me dijo nada que no te haya dicho a ti.

—¿De verdad…? ¡En su lugar yo lo habría hecho! —Tal vez se hubiera llevado una decepción, pero conservaba su buen humor—. Me dice que viva… —y le dio a la palabra un sentido extraño y limitado.

Susie se quedó un tanto desconcertada.

—Y ¿qué más quieres?

—Querida —dijo enseguida la joven—. Te aseguro que no «quiero» nada. Y aun así —añadió— voy a vivir. Oh, sí. Voy a vivir.

Volvió a dejarlas frente a frente, pero a la señora Stringham la había emocionado.

—Pues yo también, ¡ya lo verás! —Habló en un tono que aludía a su recuperación.

Sin embargo, esa vez tuvo la prudencia de insinuar más de lo que decía. Con la ayuda de Milly había llegado a comprender hasta cierto punto lo que las esperaba; esos diez minutos de conversación habían hecho que fuese más consciente de la presencia en su imaginación de una idea nueva. Tal vez fuese una idea antigua con un valor nuevo; en todo caso en esa última hora, aunque al principio tal vez débilmente, había empezado a brillar con una luz especial. La razón fue que la mañana se había oscurecido de pronto; se había oscurecido lo bastante para que destacara el brillo de una estrella. La oscuridad podía haber aumentado, pero el cielo se había despejado en comparación; y desde entonces la estrella de Susan Shepherd siguió brillando para ella. De momento, después de su conversación con Milly, fue la única luz que quedó en los cielos. Comprendió, mientras seguía mirándola, que en realidad la había instalado allí la visita de *sir* Luke Strett y que las impresiones que había tenido después habían contribuido a fijarla. La reaparición de Milly con el señor Densher detrás de sus talones —o tal vez, extrañamente, detrás de los de la señorita Croy, y la señorita Croy detrás de los de Milly— había contribuido a aumentar el efecto, aunque Susie sólo había llegado a entenderlo en el intervalo de mayor oscuridad. La oscuridad había reinado durante la hora de la visita de sus amigos, y se había aclarado un poco mientras, en una de las salitas, la notable amabilidad de Kate Croy intensificaba el hecho de que Milly y el joven estuviesen juntos en la otra. Y si no había adquirido toda la intensidad de la que era capaz, había sido porque la pobre señora aún seguía embargada por esa primera oscuridad, la oscuridad que el buen doctor había dejado tras él.

La intensidad que la circunstancia en cuestión podía revestir para la imaginación bien informada nos habría sido sin duda sobradamente revelada —además de otras cosas de interés para nuestros propósitos— en dos o tres de esas charlas confidenciales que se permitía tener ahora con la señora Lowder. Nunca se había alegrado tanto de confiar en su antigua amiga: pues, de no haber tenido, en semejante trance, alguien en quien confiar, sin duda habría tropezado por el camino. La discreción había dejado de equivaler al silencio; el silencio era grueso y tosco, mientras que la prudencia iba afinándose, aunque fuese de manera trémula, hasta acabar en punta. La mañana siguiente a la conversación que acabamos de relatar se dirigió a Lancaster Gate; y allí, en el mismísimo sanctasanctórum de Maud Manningham, encontró alivio justificando poco a poco su conducta. Hacía tiempo que tenía la costumbre de justificar su conducta con cierta regularidad: regularidad que dependía, claro, de las pruebas que, leyes ajenas a su voluntad, pudieran interponer en su camino. Nunca escatimaba, en suma, un juicio agudo y acertado sobre su manera de actuar, y en la mayor parte de los casos era capaz de expresarlo. Lo que ocurrió esa vez fue que la embargó la sensación de que no le quedaba nada que contar: estaba demasiado sumida en lo inevitable y lo abismal. Si quería justificarse tenía que ser ante otra persona, y lo primero que advirtió a su anfitriona fue que tenía que dejarla llorar. En el hotel, bajo la vigilancia de Milly, no podía, por eso se había ido; y por suerte tuvo ocasión de hacerlo a la primera oportunidad. Al principio lloró y lloró: se limitó a eso; fue por el momento la mejor explicación de lo que la había llevado allí. La señora Lowder, haciendo alarde de inteligencia, supo interpretarlo así mientras terminaba de escribir un par de cartas, con Susie sentada al lado de su escritorio. Sabía resistir el contagio de las lágrimas, pero aun así su paciencia estuvo a la altura de las vívidas súplicas de su visitante.

—¿Sabes? Nunca podré volver a llorar… al menos con ella; así que tengo que desahogarme cuando tengo ocasión. Aunque ella llore, yo no podré permitírmelo: ¿qué sería sino una confesión de mi falta de esperanzas? No estoy con ella para eso: sino para ser siempre sublime. Además, Milly tampoco llora.

—Desde luego espero —respondió la señora Lowder— que no tenga motivos.

—No lo hará ni aunque los tenga. No verterá ni una lágrima. Hay algo que se lo impedirá.

—¡Ah! —dijo la señora Lowder.

—Sí, su orgullo —explicó la señora Stringham, pese a las dudas de su amiga, y así fue como sus explicaciones cobraron forma coherente.

Maud Manningham insinuó que a ella el orgullo nunca le había impedido llorar si otras cosas la empujaban a hacerlo; lo que ocurría era que esas mismas cosas, en ocasiones, la obligaban a actuar, a llegar a acuerdos, a mantener correspondencia, a llamar a timbres, a dar órdenes a los criados, a tomar decisiones.

—Ahora mismo podría estar llorando —dijo—, si no tuviese que escribir estas cartas —lo dijo sin la menor aspereza con su angustiada compañera, a quien permitió el margen mínimo de ser diferente. No la había interrumpido igual que no habría interrumpido al afinador del piano. Le dio tiempo a la pobre Susie; y, cuando la señora Lowder, para guardar las apariencias y llegar a tiempo a la recogida del correo, fue con las cartas selladas a la puerta de la sala para entregárselas al lacayo al que había convocado apretando un timbre, los hechos del caso estaban lo bastante claros. No obstante, sólo hicieron falta dos o tres, dada su importancia, para preparar el camino del más grave: la conversación de la señora Stringham el día anterior con *sir* Luke, que había querido verla para hablarle de Milly.

—¿Fue él quién lo quiso?

—Creo que se alegró. Está clarísimo. Se quedó un cuarto de hora. Noté que para él era mucho. Está interesado —dijo la señora Stringham.

—¿En su caso?

—Según él, no es un caso.

—Y ¿qué es entonces?

—No es, al menos —explicó la señora Stringham—, el que ella creía, aunque todavía es posible que lo sea, cuando fue a verle sin mi conocimiento. Fue porque temía algo, y él la examinó a conciencia: se ha asegurado. Está equivocada: no tiene lo que pensaba.

—Y ¿qué pensaba? —quiso saber la señora Lowder.

—No me lo dijo.

—Y ¿no le preguntaste?

—No le pregunté nada —dijo la pobre Susie—. Me limité a escuchar lo que me contó. Y no me contó más que lo necesario… Fue muy correcto —prosiguió—. Gracias a Dios, está interesado.

—Debía de estar interesado en ti, querida —observó amable Maud Manningham.

Su visitante se lo tomó con ingenuidad.

—Sí, querida, creo que sí. Quiero decir que ha visto lo que puede hacer conmigo.

La señora Lowder la entendió.

—Por ella.

—Por ella. Cualquier cosa que pueda o deba hacer. Puede utilizarme hasta mi último aliento, y al menos eso le gusta. Dice que lo mejor para ella es que sea feliz.

—Sin duda es lo mejor para cualquiera. Entonces —preguntó generosa la señora Lowder—, ¿a qué vienen tantos llantos?

—Es solo —gimoteó la pobre Susie— que todo es tan raro, tan fuera de nuestro alcance. Sobre todo si ella no puede…

—Podrá. —La señora Lowder no conocía imposibles—. Lo hará.

—Bueno… si la ayudas. Él cree que podemos ayudarla.

La señora Lowder consideró un momento, a su manera imponente, lo que creía *sir* Luke. Se sentó con las rodillas separadas, no muy distinta de una pintoresca matrona, con pendientes en las orejas, en un puesto del mercado; mientras su amiga, delante de ella, iba echándole las diversas verdades del asunto sobre el ancho mandil.

—Pero ¿fue a verte sólo para eso… para decirte que tiene que ser feliz?

—Que debemos hacer que lo sea: ahí está la clave. Según me dijo, no hace falta más —prosiguió la señora Stringham—: le dio mucha importancia e insinuó que era posible.

—Ah, bueno, ¡si él lo cree posible!

—Lo que digo sobre todo es que le dio mucha importancia. Lo dejó en mis manos, como parte de mi obligación. De lo demás se ocupará él.

—Y ¿qué es lo demás? —preguntó la señora Lowder.

—No lo sé. Lo que él haga. Quiere seguir visitándola.

—Entonces ¿por qué dices que no es un caso? Debe serlo por fuerza.

La señora Stringham pareció admitirlo.

—No el mismo caso que ella creía.

—¿Es otro?

—Otro.

—Y ¿al examinarla en busca de lo que ella creía ha encontrado otra cosa?

—Otra cosa.

—Y ¿qué ha encontrado?

—¡Ah! —exclamó la señora Stringham—. ¡Dios me libre de saberlo!

—¿No te lo dijo?

Pero la pobre Susie se había recuperado.

—Lo que digo es que, si la hay, acabaré sabiéndolo. Aún lo está considerando, pero puedo confiar en él… porque creo que confía en mí. Lo está considerando —repitió.

—En otras palabras ¿no está del todo seguro?

—Bueno, la tiene en observación. Creo que es eso. Ahora se irá, pero tiene que volver a verlo dentro de tres meses.

—En tal caso creo —dijo Maud Lowder— que no tendría que habernos asustado de antemano.

Susie se impacientó un poco, pues ya había abrazado la noble causa del médico eminente. Al menos es lo que dejó traslucir en el leve reproche de su respuesta.

—¿Es que nos asusta ayudar a que sea feliz?

La señora Lowder respondió un tanto envarada.

—Sí; me asusta. A mí todo me asusta, no tengo reparo en admitirlo, si no lo entiendo. ¿A qué se refiere con lo de que sea feliz?

La señora Stringham respondió sin dudarlo:

—¡Oh, lo sabes!

En realidad lo dijo para que su amiga tuviese que admitirlo; tal como hizo un momento después. Lo aceptó con ciertos reparos e incluso es posible que acudiese en su ayuda un extraño y frívolo humor.

—Bueno, digamos que parece que sí. ¡Lo importante es…! —Pero se interrumpió como intimidada por lo que iba a preguntar.

—¿Si la curará?

—Exacto. ¿Es esa medicina… un verdadero remedio?

—Bueno, ¡yo creo que deberíamos saberlo! —afirmó con delicadeza la señora Stringham.

—¡Ah!, pero no padecemos esa enfermedad.

—¿Nunca has estado enamorada, querida? —preguntó Susan Shepherd.

—Sí, hija, pero no por prescripción médica.

Maud Manningham había dicho esto obligada con una leve frivolidad que obró —y felizmente— como un desafío para el ánimo de su visitante.

—¡Oh, por supuesto no tenemos que pedirle permiso! Pero saber que él cree que nos conviene ya es algo.

—Mi querida amiga —exclamó la señora Lowder—, me da a mí que eso ya lo sabíamos sin él. Conque… ¡si es todo lo que tiene que decirnos…!

—¡Ah! —la interrumpió la señora Stringham—, pero no lo es. Creo que *sir* Luke tendrá más que decir. No se librará de mí con una impertinencia. Quiere que volvamos a vernos; tuvo el detalle de pedírmelo. Para algo será.

—Pero ¿para qué? ¿Crees que quiere proponerte a alguien? ¿Es que no le contaste nada?

La señora Stringham respondió a sus preguntas.

—Le demostré que lo entendía. No pude hacer más. No creí tener la libertad de ser más explícita; pero me sentí, a pesar de lo mucho que me conmovió su visita, reconfortada por lo que me dijiste anteanoche.

—¿Por lo que te dije en el coche después de dejar a Milly con Kate?

—Te hiciste cargo en tres minutos. Y ahora que está aquí, ahora que lo he conocido y me he formado mi propia impresión sobre él, creo —dijo la señora Stringham— que estuviste magnífica.

—Pues claro que estuve magnífica. ¿Cuándo —preguntó Maud Manningham— no lo he estado? Pero Milly no lo estará si se casa con Merton Densher.

—¡Oh, siempre es magnífico casarse con el hombre a quien una quiere! Pero ¡estamos yendo muy

deprisa! —dijo la señora Stringham con una desconsolada sonrisa.

—Siempre me doy prisa cuando creo que la ocasión lo merece. Al fin y al cabo, ¿no fue el instinto lo que me empujó cuando volvíamos anteanoche a buscar a Kate? Sentí lo que sentí: supe que él había vuelto.

—En eso, como digo, estuviste magnífica. Pero espera —dijo la señora Stringham— a que lo hayas visto.

—Lo veré cuanto antes —afirmó la señora Lowder con decisión—. Pero ¿qué impresión te ha causado? —preguntó.

La impresión de la señora Stringham parecía perdida en un sinfín de dudas.

—¿Cómo va a interesarse por ella?

Su compañera, a su manera imponente, respondió:

—Pues dándole ocasión.

—Pues ¡dásela por el amor de Dios! —gimoteó la señora Stringham—. Lo tienes en tus manos.

Los ojos de Maud Lowder se posaron en los de su amiga.

—¿Es ésa tu impresión de él?

—Es mi impresión de ti, querida. Manejas a todo el mundo.

Los ojos de la señora Lowder siguieron fijos en ella y, para su sorpresa, Susan Shepherd siguió sintiéndose igual de sincera a pesar de haberla complacido. Pero había una notable salvedad.

—No manejo a Kate.

Eso dio a entender algo que su visitante ignoraba: algo que dejó boquiabierta a la señora Stringham.

—¿Insinúas que Kate le quiere?

Era un hecho que, como sabemos, la señora de Lancaster Gate le había ocultado hasta ese momento, y la pregunta de su amiga produjo un cambio en su semblante. Parpadeó… y luego consideró la cuestión; tras lo cual, fuese porque se había delatado inadvertidamente o porque había tomado una decisión y le había afectado la cualidad de la sorpresa de la señora Stringham, aceptó todas las consecuencias. Lo que le ocurrió, según Susan Shepherd, no fue sólo que estuviese dispuesta a sacarles el mayor provecho, sino que vio de pronto más posibilidades en ellas de las que había imaginado. De hecho, cierta impaciencia subrayó esa transición: había estado ocultando una importante verdad y no le habría gustado oír que no la había ocultado con inteligencia. Susie, no obstante, se sintió un poco tonta por no haberse dado cuenta. Sin embargo, en lo que más pensó Susie ante aquel brusco y repentino estallido fue en la habilidad de Kate para el disimulo. Tuvo tiempo de considerarlo mientras esperaba una respuesta a su grito.

—Kate cree que sí. Pero se equivoca. Y nadie lo sabe. —Estas palabras, claras y responsables, fueron lo que respondió la señora Lowder, pero no todo lo que respondió—. Tú no lo sabes: a eso es a lo que debes ceñirte. O más bien a negarlo de forma tajante.

—¿Que le quiere?

—Que cree que le quiere. Firme y categóricamente. Incluso que lo hayas oído.

Susie consideró esa nueva obligación.

—¿Negárselo entonces a Milly… si pregunta?

—A Milly, claro. Nadie más te lo preguntará.

—Bueno —dijo la señora Stringham al cabo de un instante—, Milly no lo preguntará.

La señora Lowder dudó:

—¿Estás segura?

—Sí, cuanto más lo pienso. Y es una suerte. Miento muy mal.

—Yo, gracias a Dios, miento muy bien —casi gruñó la señora Lowder—, cuando, como ocurre a menudo, no se puede hacer otra cosa mejor. Una tiene que hacer siempre lo mejor. Aunque, en tal caso —continuó—, tal vez lo consigamos sin necesidad de mentiras. —Su interés había aumentado; su amiga la notó, al cabo de unos minutos, más exaltada y comprometida y enseguida comprendió la causa de esa diferencia. Aunque en ese momento la señora Stringham sólo acertó a discernirla vagamente; al principio sólo vio que Maud había encontrado una razón para ayudarla; la razón era que, extrañamente, ella también podía ayudar a Maud, para lo cual estaba incluso dispuesta a mentir. Lo que mejor captó fue tal vez que su anfitriona estaba un poco decepcionada por sus dudas sobre la solidez social de esa forma de actuar; y que eso a su vez arrojaría una luz más clara. El terreno en el que podían coincidir de manera más íntima era la verdad sobre el error de Kate, tal como lo presentaba su tía, el error sobre sus sentimientos, que podía corregirse. La señora Stringham vio que la había reclutado para sacar del error a Kate: mediante artes, no obstante, que de momento no acertaba a comprender. O ¿sería sólo para sacar del error al señor Densher? Y, si lo conseguían, eso podría hacer que consiguieran más cosas. Ante esta tarea, por desgracia, su corazón ya había flaqueado. Notó que creía a pies juntillas en lo que creía Milly, y en lo que haría que cuidar de ella fuese un esfuerzo espantoso. Todo eso estaba confusamente presente en su interior: una nube de preguntas

de la que, no obstante, sobresalía la enorme figura sedente de Maud Manningham, como una mole cada vez más definida, que adoptaba en cierto modo la forma de un oráculo. El oráculo habló: o al menos ésa fue su impresión, una impresión acorde con el aire que la vio inhalar. «Sí —dijo—. Te ayudaré con Milly, porque si sale bien me será de ayuda con Kate»: una idea que la señora Stringham pudo entender. De pronto se sintió, aunque sea raro decirlo, dispuesta a actuar en perjuicio de Kate, o al menos por el bien de Kate, tal y como con noble preocupación lo entendía la señora Lowder. De pronto sintió que, aunque en el fondo estaba convencida de su buena estrella, le daba igual lo que pudiera ser de Kate: Kate no estaba en peligro. Kate no era conmovedora; pasara lo que pasara Kate Croy sabía cuidar de sí misma. Vio además que, a estas alturas, su amiga discurría incluso más deprisa. La señora Lowder había bosquejado ya, en su imaginación, un plan de acción, un plan que expuso de manera muy vívida al decir:

—Tenéis que quedaros unos días, y cenar las dos cuanto antes con él. —Además, Maud se atribuyó el mérito de haber hecho mucho, dos noches antes, gracias a una especie de intuición piadosa o a una sabia presciencia, para preparar el terreno—. La pobre niña se delató, en el rato que estuvo conmigo cuando fuiste a buscar el chal.

—¡Oh!, recuerdo cómo me lo contaste después. Aunque no fue nada que yo no hubiese notado —observó Susie, haciéndose justicia.

Pero la señora Lowder la contradijo con tanta decisión que la hizo dudar de lo que había dicho.

—Supongo que debería sentirme edificada por las cosas a las que estás dispuesta a renunciar de forma tan generosa.

—¿Renunciar? —repitió la señora Stringham—. Yo no renuncio a nada: me aferro.

Su anfitriona demostró su impaciencia volviéndose con cierta rigidez hacia el escritorio con adornos de latón y cambiando de sitio uno o dos de los objetos que había en él.

—Pues yo me rindo. Sabes que el señor Densher no es ni mucho menos lo que tenía pensado para ella. Sabes lo que creía posible.

—¡Oh!, has sido magnífica —Susie fue justa—. Un duque, una duquesa, una princesa, un palacio: también me has hecho creer a mí en todo eso. Pero el inconveniente es que ella no cree. Por suerte, por lo que parece, tampoco lo desea. Así que ¿qué se le va a hacer? Te aseguro que he tenido muchos sueños, pero ahora sólo tengo uno.

El tono con que la señora Stringham pronunció estas palabras reveló hasta tal punto su significado que la señora Lowder no pudo sino darse por enterada. Estuvieron un momento considerando la cuestión.

—¿Que ella tenga lo que desea?

—Si ha de procurarle algún bien.

La señora Lowder pareció pensar lo que podría procurarle; pero de momento habló de otra cosa.

—Me irrita un poco, ¿sabes?: por supuesto soy desconsiderada. Y he pensado de todo. Pero eso no quita que debamos actuar con decoro.

—Debemos aceptarla —concluyó la señora Stringham— tal como es.

—Y debemos aceptar al señor Densher tal como es. —La señora Lowder acompañó sus palabras con una risa lúgubre—. ¡Lastima que no sea mejor!

—Bueno, si lo fuese —replicó su amiga—, lo habrías querido para tu sobrina, y en ese caso Milly interferiría. Es decir —añadió Susie—, que interferiría con tus planes.

—Así también interfiere… aunque ahora ya da igual. Pero Kate y ella me parecieron, en realidad poco después de que vinierais, muy parecidas. Pensé que tu niña, no me importa decírtelo, ayudaría a la mía; y cuando lo digo —prosiguió la señora Lowder— probablemente pensarás que fue parte de la razón de que os acogiera tan bien. Así que ya ves a lo que renuncio. Renuncio. Pero lo hago —continuó— con elegancia. Así que adiós a mis planes. ¡Bienvenida, señora Densher! ¡Cielos! —gruñó.

Susie se contuvo un minuto.

—Incluso como señora Densher mi niña será alguien.

—Sí, no será una don nadie. Además —dijo la señora Lowder—, estamos hablando por hablar.

Su compañera asintió con tristeza.

—Hay muchas cosas que no tenemos en cuenta.

—Aun así es interesante. —Y la señora Lowder tuvo otra idea—. Tampoco es que él sea un don nadie. —Eso la llevó otra vez a la pregunta que le había planteado antes y que su amiga no había respondido—. ¿Qué te parece?

Susan Shepherd, por razones poco claras incluso para sí misma, prefirió ser cauta. Y no pasó de las generalidades.

—Es encantador.

Miró a los ojos a la señora Lowder de esa forma tan penetrante en que mira la gente cuando no es del todo sincera: circunstancia que causó su efecto.

—Sí; es encantador.

El efecto de sus palabras, no obstante, fue igual de marcado; casi determinaron en la señora Stringham la vuelta al buen humor.

—¡Pensaba que no te gustaba!

—No me gusta para Kate.

—Pero tampoco te gusta para Milly.

La señora Stringham se puso en pie mientras hablaba y su amiga hizo lo mismo.

—Me gusta, querida, para mí.

—Pues es la mejor manera.

—Bueno, es una manera. No es lo bastante bueno para mi sobrina, y no es lo bastante bueno para ti. En cambio, una es tía, desdichada y tonta.

—¡Oh, yo tampoco…! —declaró Susie.

Su compañera continuó.

—Una vive para los demás. Tú lo haces. Si viviese sólo para mí, el señor Densher no me importaría lo más mínimo.

Pero la señora Stringham fue más enérgica.

—¡Ah!, a mí parece encantador con independencia de cómo viva yo.

En fin, esto acabó de vencer a la señora Lowder. Se contuvo unos instantes y se rindió con una risa.

—Por supuesto, personalmente no tiene nada de malo.

—Es lo único que mantengo —respondió Susie con cierta reserva; y el comentario en cuestión, lo que Merton Densher tenía «personalmente» cerró en la práctica, con cierta inconsecuencia, el primero de sus conciliábulos.

II

Al menos les había servido, o eso les pareció, para estar más informadas sobre el eminente médico, a quien ahora podían imaginar observando, esperando, estudiando, o al menos planteándose un proceso similar antes de decidirse. La señora Stringham comprendió que *sir* Luke estaba considerando el asunto con un espíritu que, en esa misma ocasión, en Lancaster Gate, ella había esbozado antes de marcharse. Siguió el curso de su razonamiento. Si lo que habían hablado podía suceder —es decir, si Milly lograba apartar de su cabeza esos pensamientos— no le haría ningún daño y podría hacerle mucho bien. Si no era posible —si, colaborando con interés, aunque con tacto, no podían hacer nada por ayudarla— no se hallarían en peor situación que antes. Sólo que en ese último caso la joven habría tenido libertad para disfrutar del verano y el otoño; se habría esforzado por cumplir las indicaciones del médico, y, al volver por fin con esa eminencia, lo encontraría —además de con más cosas que mostrarle— más dispuesto a seguir tratándola. También era evidente para Susan Shepherd —lo cual sirvió además de base para un segundo informe a su vieja amiga— que Milly cumplía con su papel en el ensayo del plan general, desde el momento en que anunció con franqueza y prontitud su intención de ir a ver a *sir* Luke Strett para darle las gracias y despedirse. Incluso especificó lo que quería agradecerle: que hubiese sido tan comprensivo con su comportamiento.

—¿Sabes?, no estaba segura de si, después de la libertad que me tomé, no recibiría una carta de reproche.

Eso le dijo Milly, lo cual la impulsó a responder con cierta precipitación.

—¡Oh!, nunca recibirás una carta de reproche suya.

Enseguida reparó en esa precipitación, cuando su joven amiga le preguntó.

—¿Por qué no iba a tratarme igual que a cualquiera que le gastase una jugarreta?

—Bueno, él no se lo ha tomado como una jugarreta. Comprendió tu manera de actuar. Ya ves que no se ha ofendido.

—Sí… ya lo veo. Es más comprensivo conmigo que con los demás, porque es la forma de dejarme de lado. Está fingiendo, y no cree que valga la pena regañarme.

Entristecida por haber sido la causa de este ominoso estallido, la pobre Susie se aferró a su única ventaja.

—¿De verdad estás acusando a un hombre como *sir* Luke Strett de actuar a la ligera contigo?

No pudo hacer como si no reparase en la mirada que le echó su amiga: una extraña y casi divertida percepción de lo que le parecía entender.

—Bueno… en la medida en que compadecerme como me compadece sea tratarme a la ligera.

—No te compadece —razonó muy seria Susie—. Sólo te aprecia, igual que todo el mundo.

—Pues no tiene por qué. Él no es igual que los demás.

—Y ¿por qué, si quiere ayudarte?

Milly le dedicó otra mirada, pero esta vez acompañada de una maravillosa sonrisa.

—¡Ah, ahí lo tienes! —La señora Stringham se ruborizó, porque ahí lo tenía otra vez. Pero Milly no insistió—. Ayudarme… ¡ayudarme! Por supuesto que quiero. —Luego, como de costumbre, abrazó a su amiga—. No voy a ser así de mala con él.

—¡Espero que no! —y la señora Stringham se rio por el beso—. ¡Aunque no me cabe duda de que de ti lo aceptaría! Eres tú, mi niña, la que no eres como los demás.

La anuencia de Milly le dio, al cabo de un instante, la última palabra.

—No, porque los demás lo aceptan todo de mí.

Y lo que, desde luego, la señora Stringham tuvo que aceptar con resignación fue que no le hablara de la visita que había hecho. De hecho, señaló el inicio de una extraña independencia entre las dos —una

independencia de acción y de costumbre— respecto al futuro de Milly. Siguieron caminos separados con el decidido consentimiento de la joven; lo cual no era en realidad sino lo que le había pedido de forma tan extraordinaria después del primer encuentro de la señora Stringham con *sir* Luke. Aceptó la idea de que Susie tuviera o fuese a tener otras entrevistas: privadas, comprometidas, personales; aceptaba cualquier idea, pero sobre todo la de que ella pensaba seguir como si no pasara nada. Ya que iban a ayudarla, sería lo que haría; y, aunque su compañera no lo supo por ella, fue lo que hizo con su médico. Planteó la visita según los motivos más sencillos: había ido sólo a decirle lo mucho que la había conmovido su buen natural. Eso requirió pocas explicaciones, pues, como le había dicho la señora Stringham, él comprendió que lo único que podía responder era que no tenía de qué preocuparse.

—Pasé un agradable cuarto de hora con esa señora tan inteligente. Tiene usted buenos amigos.

—Eso piensa cada uno de ellos de los demás. Aunque yo también lo pienso —continuó Milly— de todos. Son ustedes excelentes el uno para el otro. Y yo diría que es lo que más me conviene.

En ese momento, la embargó una de sus más extrañas impresiones, que al mismo tiempo fue una de sus más delicadas alarmas: la intuición de que si iba, por así decirlo, demasiado lejos, podría privar de naturalidad, si no de valor, su relación. Ir demasiado lejos equivalía a fracasar en el intento de seguir, al menos, siendo sencilla. Él acabaría detestándola si lo distraía constantemente y lo ponía en evidencia mientras ejercía una amabilidad que, sin duda, era para él un método sofisticado. Susie no la detestaría, porque Susie quería sufrir por ella; Susie tenía la noble idea de que así la ayudaría. No obstante, no era de esperar que el más eminente de los médicos londinenses actuase de ese modo. No dispondría de tiempo ni aunque quisiera; por lo que, en una palabra, Milly tuvo la sensación de estar advertida. Cara a cara con su esforzado y atento médico, experimentó en determinado momento una exaltación de los sentimientos como la que había sentido en su decisiva conversación con Susie. Todo se redujo a lo mismo: también a él le ayudaría a ayudarla si era posible; pero, si no lo era, colaboraría para solucionarlo. A partir de semejante premisa, no habría necesitado muchos más minutos para casi intercambiar los papeles de médico y paciente. ¿Qué era de hecho él más que un paciente; qué era ella más que un médico, desde el momento en que aceptaba de una vez por todas la necesidad, y adoptaba de una vez por todas la política, de ahorrarle sorpresas sobre su sutileza? Le dejaría la sutileza a él: él sabría disfrutarla, y, sin duda, con el tiempo ella disfrutaría de su disfrute. Llegó a imaginar que el éxito interior de estas reflexiones le daba ante sus ojos cierto rubor y florecimiento, una apariencia de salud; y lo que ocurrió después pareció corroborar esa impresión.

—¡Todo ayuda, desde luego! —respondió *sir* Luke de buen humor a su inofensiva ocurrencia—. Pero, con ayuda o sin ella, tiene usted muy buen aspecto.

—¡Oh, eso me parecía! —respondió; y fue como lo viese venir. Sólo se preguntó qué habría adivinado el médico. Si había adivinado algo sería ciertamente notable por su parte. En cuanto a lo que había que adivinar, no podía —si es que lo había adivinado— haberlo deducido más que por su propia perspicacia. Esta perspicacia era por tanto inmensa; y si le proporcionaba la sutileza que pensaba dejar en sus manos, su parte no sería escasa. Ni tampoco, ya puestos, lo sería la suya… que de hecho estaba disfrutando ya. Le habría gustado saber si en realidad no podría haber algo para ella. Cuando fue a verle no estaba segura de estar «mejor», y él no utilizó, y tendría muchísimo cuidado de no utilizarlo, ese comprometido término con ella; a pesar de lo cual habría estado dispuesta a decir, por su amable compasión: «Sí, debo de estarlo», pues él tenía la intuición de que algo le había pasado. Era una intuición, porque ¿quién iba a haberle contado nada? Susie, estaba segura, no había vuelto a verle, y había cosas que era imposible que le hubiese contado la primera vez. Ya que era tan perspicaz, ¿por qué no iba a admitirlo ella y a aceptar con elegancia la nueva circunstancia, la única por la que él estaba claramente deseando felicitarla, como una causa suficiente? Si uno acariciaba una causa con la ternura suficiente, podría producir un efecto; y eso, para empezar, sería una forma de acariciarla—. El otro día me dio —prosiguió— muchas cosas en las que pensar, y es lo que he estado haciendo: pensar como probablemente hubiera querido usted. Creo que debo ser muy fácil de tratar —dijo con una sonrisa—, puesto que me ha hecho usted ya tanto bien.

El único obstáculo para una auténtica reciprocidad con él era que parecía tan familiarizado con todas las posibilidades de uno que uno no disfrutaba de la mejoría.

—¡Oh, no! Es usted muy difícil de tratar. Le aseguro que con usted necesito recurrir a todo mi saber.

—Bueno, lo que quería decir es que he cumplido. —No se había creído lo más mínimo su respuesta, pues estaba convencida de que, si de verdad hubiese sido difícil, eso habría sido la última cosa que le habría dicho—. Hago —dijo— lo que me gusta.

—Pues eso es lo que me gusta a mí también. Pero, aunque esté haciendo tan buen tiempo, debe marcharse enseguida. —Dicho esto, cuando ella se apresuró a responder que su partida, primero al Tirol y

luego a Venecia, estaba fijada para el 14, respondió con rapidez—. ¿A Venecia? Es perfecto, porque nos veremos allí. Sueño con ir en octubre, cuando confío en tener tres semanas disponibles; tres semanas en las que, si consigo estar libre, mi sobrina, una jovencita que hace de mí lo que quiere, se propone llevarme donde le apetezca. Ayer la oí decir que cree que le apetecerá Venecia.

—Es estupendo. Le esperaré allí. Y ¡cualquier cosa que, de antemano o en cualquier otro sentido, pueda hacer por usted…!

—Oh, gracias. Mi sobrina, me parece, se encargará de todo. Pero será magnífico verla allí.

—Creo que debería admitir —dijo al cabo de un momento— que soy muy fácil de tratar.

Pero él volvió a mover la cabeza; no estaba dispuesto a dar su brazo a torcer.

—Aún no ha llegado usted a eso.

—¿Tan mala tiene que estar una?

—Bueno, no creo haber visto nunca… que un tratamiento sea «fácil». Dudo que sea posible. Nunca he visto a nadie que esté lo bastante mal. La facilidad, como ve, es para usted.

—Sí, ya veo… ya veo.

Hicieron una pausa amistosa, aunque tal vez un poco incómoda; tras la cual *sir* Luke preguntó:

—Y esa inteligente señora ¿irá con usted?

—¿La señora Stringham? Oh, sí. Espero que se quede conmigo hasta el final.

Él adoptó un gesto jovial e inexpresivo.

—Hasta el final ¿de qué?

—Bueno… de todo.

—¡Ah, entonces tiene usted suerte! —se rio—. El final de todo está muy lejos. Esto, espero que lo sepa —dijo *sir* Luke— es sólo el principio. —Y la siguiente pregunta que se aventuró a hacer podría haber sido una parte de su esperanza—. ¿Sólo van ella y usted?

—No, vendrán también otras dos amigas; dos señoras a quienes hemos tratado más que a nadie y que son las personas más indicadas.

Él se quedó pensativo un instante.

—Entonces ¿serán cuatro mujeres?

—¡Ah! —exclamó Milly—, somos viudas y huérfanas. Pero creo —añadió como para decir lo que veía que le tranquilizaría— que aun así tendremos atractivo, en el viaje, para los caballeros. Cuando habla usted de «vivir», supongo que se refiere sobre todo a los caballeros.

—Cuando hablo de «vivir» —respondió el médico al cabo de un momento que tal vez dedicase a asimilar lo picante de su comentario—, cuando hablo de vivir creo que me refiero más que nada al maravilloso espectáculo, con toda su lozanía, que ofrecen los jóvenes de su edad. Así que siga usted tal como es. Cada vez la entiendo mejor. No podrá —llegó a decir por cortesía— mejorarlo.

Ella le escuchó con mucha calma.

—Una de nuestras compañeras será la señorita Croy, que me acompañó la primera vez. En ella sí que la vida es espléndida; y en parte es porque me tiene devoción. Aunque es magnífica en sí misma. Así que si le apetece verla… —le soltó con desparpajo.

—¡Oh!, me apetece ver a cualquiera que le tenga devoción, sin duda será divertido participar. Conque, si va a ir a Venecia, ¿la veré?

—Tenemos que arreglarlo sin falta. Además tiene un amigo que tal vez vaya también —Milly se encontró de pronto hablando de eso—. Creo que es probable que venga, porque siempre la sigue.

Sir Luke se sorprendió.

—¿Es que están enamorados?

—Él sí —dijo con una sonrisa Milly—; pero ella no. Ella no le quiere.

Sir Luke la miró interesado.

—¿Qué le pasa?

—Nada, sólo que a ella no le gusta.

Sir Luke insistió:

—¿Es bien parecido?

—¡Oh!, es muy apuesto. Mucho.

—Y ¿estará en Venecia?

—Eso dice temer mi amiga. Si va estará todo el tiempo con ella.

—Y ¿ella estará todo el tiempo con usted?

—Estamos muy unidas… sí.

—Bueno, entonces —dijo *sir* Luke—, no serán cuatro mujeres solas.

—Oh, no; soy consciente de que puede que haya otros caballeros. Pero él —prosiguió Milly en un tono igual de extraordinario— no habrá ido por mí.

—No… ya veo. Pero ¿no puede usted ayudarle?

—Y ¿usted? —preguntó en un tono extraño Milly. Luego, por seguir con la broma, le explicó—: Como ve, voy a presentarle a todas mis amistades.

Tal vez por seguir también con la broma, su eminente amigo respondió a su vez:

—Pero ese caballero no forma parte de sus amistades. Quiero decir que es amigo de… ¿cómo ha dicho usted?, la señorita Croy. A no ser, claro, que usted también esté interesada por él.

—¡Oh!, claro que estoy interesada.

—Y ¿cree que puede haber alguna oportunidad para él?

—Me gusta lo bastante —dijo Milly— para esperar que así sea.

—Entonces todo va bien. Pero, dígame —preguntó a continuación *sir* Luke—, ¿qué tengo yo que ver con él?

—Nada —respondió Milly—, pero si va es posible que lo vea. Y en ese caso no seremos sólo cuatro mujeres aburridas.

La miró como si estuviera poniendo un poco a prueba su paciencia.

—Es usted la mujer menos aburrida que he visto jamás. Jamás, ¿lo entiende? No hay razón para que no tenga usted una vida verdaderamente espléndida.

—Eso me dice todo el mundo —respondió ella enseguida.

—Mi convicción, que ya fue muy intensa la primera vez que la vi, se ha reforzado después de conocer a su amiga. No me cabe duda: tiene el mundo entero por delante.

—¿Qué le contó mi amiga? —preguntó Milly.

—Nada que a usted no le habría gustado oír. Hablamos de usted… y con mucha libertad. No lo niego. Pero eso demuestra que no le pido a usted lo imposible.

La joven se había puesto en pie.

—Creo saber lo que me pide.

—Para usted —prosiguió— nada es imposible. Así que siga adelante. —Lo repitió, pues quería que comprendiese que así era como él la veía—. Está usted bien.

—Bueno —sonrió ella—, pues consérveme así.

—¡Oh!, ya se escapará usted.

—Consérveme, consérveme —insistió sencillamente con sus ojos amables posados en él.

Le había dado la mano para despedirse, y él la conservó un momento entre las suyas. Entonces, mientras consideraba si quedaba algo por decir, acudió a su memoria algo más; aunque no pudiera hacer gran cosa sobre este particular.

—Por supuesto, si hay algo que pueda hacer por su amigo: me refiero al caballero del que me ha hablado…

Dejó claro, en suma, que estaba dispuesto.

—¡Oh! ¿El señor Densher? —Era como si lo hubiese olvidado.

—El señor Densher… ¿Así se llama?

—Sí… pero su caso no es tan horrible. —En menos de un minuto se había librado del asunto.

—Sin duda… si usted esta interesada en él. —Se había librado, pero fue como si él viese en sus ojos, aunque ellos también se habían desinteresado, una razón para recordárselo—. De todos modos, si hay algo que pueda hacer uno…

Ella lo miró mientras pensaba, mientras sonreía:

—Me temo que en realidad no hay nada que pueda hacer uno.

III

Nunca hasta esa mañana había tenido tanto la sensación de sumergirse en lo que poseía; contenta y agradecida de que el calor del verano meridional se demorase en los altos y floridos salones, estancias palaciegas con suelos duros y fríos que reflejaban el eterno barniz y donde el sol centelleaba, con el cabrilleo del agua marina, por las ventanas abiertas, jugando con los «temas» pintados en los espléndidos techos: medallones de púrpura y marrón, de color viejo y melancólico, medallas de oro enrojecido por los años, labrado y ornado, patinado por el tiempo, todo con florituras, festones y dorados en las grandes molduras y concavidades repujadas (un nido de blancos querubines, amistosas criaturas del aire) destacadas por una segunda hilera de ventanas más pequeñas que se abrían directamente en la fachada y contribuían a hacer de aquel lugar un gran salón señorial a pesar de las Baedekers y las horribles y llamativas fotografías del grupo de Milly. Así por fin, aunque hacía tres semanas que disfrutaba del palacio, tuvo la impresión de ocuparlo de verdad; tal vez porque era la primera vez que estaba sola —sola de verdad— desde que salió de Londres, comprendió plenamente y sin estorbos lo que el gran Eugenio había hecho por ella. El gran Eugenio, recomendado por grandes duques y norteamericanos, había entrado a su servicio en el último momento: había llegado de París, después de múltiples *pourparlers*[36] con la señora Stringham —a quien Milly había dado más carta blanca que nunca— para acompañarla al continente y no separarse de ella, y le había consagrado, desde el momento en que se conocieron, todos los secretos de su experiencia. Ella lo había juzgado de antemano —políglota y universal, encantador y muy serio— como un estafador consumado de pies a cabeza; pues mientras se llevaba una cuidada mano italiana al corazón hundía la otra en el bolsillo de Milly, que notó enseguida que se le ajustaba como un guante. Lo curioso era que estos elementos de los que tenían conciencia mutua habían formado un vínculo indestructible y echado los cimientos de una feliz relación; pues eran a estas alturas, de un modo extraño, grotesco y encantador, lo que más mantenía la confianza entre los dos y lo que mejor la expresaba.

Ella había visto enseguida lo que ocurría: una vez más, lo mismo de siempre. Eugenio, después de una conversación de cinco minutos, la había entendido, se había hecho cargo, como todo el mundo, no tanto del cuidado con que había que tratarla, como del cuidado con que había que dejarla. Todo el mundo la entendía, todo el mundo se hacía cargo; pero ella tenía la sensación de que con nadie esa idea había supuesto un vínculo tan estrecho ni una rendición tan entregada por su parte. Elegante, respetuoso, con una habilidad consumada —con las manos siempre dispuestas y la figura, con su cabello pulcro y blanco, su rostro grueso y bien afeitado y sus ojos negros y profesionales, casi teatrales, de un tenor famoso demasiado envejecido para hacer el amor, pero capaz todavía de hacer dinero— en ocasiones le daba a entender que ella era, de todos los clientes de su gloriosa carrera, la única con quien su interés era más personal y paternal. Los demás se habían cruzado en su camino por motivos profesionales, pero sus sentimientos por ella eran especiales. La confianza se apoyaba así en que ella lo creyera a pies juntillas: no había nada de lo que se sintiese más segura. Les pasaba cada vez que conversaban; él era abismal, pero su intimidad residía en la superficie. Había ocupado ya para ella un lugar entre quienes la ayudarían, y al meditarlo desde semejante perspectiva lo colocaba, para esa función definitiva, al lado de la pobre Susie a quien ahora compadecía más que nunca por tener que sufrir tanto y no poder decirlo. Eugenio tenía el tacto de un legatario universal: que era una personalidad que uno podía adoptar; mientras que, en el caso de que ella muriese, no imaginaba a Susie desempeñando ningún papel, pues Susie sólo se preocupaba de manera insistente y exclusiva por su duración provisional. En aquel momento, con un nuevo estallido de la imaginación, Milly pensó que, ya puestos, a ella también le habría gustado creer en ese mismo principio. En realidad, Eugenio había hecho por ella más de lo que probablemente imaginaba —al fin y al cabo, no lo sabía todo— al instalarla de manera tan perfecta, de forma tan admirable, con apenas unas pocas indicaciones, para pasar el final del otoño. Estas escasas indicaciones, más bien una sugerencia general,

habían sido: «En Venecia, por favor, si es posible, nada de hoteles horribles ni vulgares; sino, si puede conseguirse —ya me entiende— unas elegantes habitaciones antiguas, totalmente independientes, para varios meses. Que sean muchas, y cuanto más interesantes mejor: parte de un palacio, histórico y pintoresco, pero sin olores, donde podamos sentirnos cómodos, con una cocinera, ¿entiende?, con criados, con frescos, con tapices, con antigüedades, todo lo necesario para que parezca que estamos instalados».

La prueba de lo bien que la había entendido estaba en el propio palacio; en cuanto a la magistral adquisición de éste, ella no había hecho preguntas. Le había mostrado de sobra lo que pensaba y a él le había gustado su paciencia; Milly pronto conocería la parte de la transacción que le concernía, y la relación de Eugenio con las cifras que encontró anotadas acabó pareciendo, por así decirlo, aún más insignificante. Era evidente que personas encantadoras, verdaderas amantes de Venecia, le habían cedido su casa, y habían huido lejos, a otros países, para ocultar su vergüenza por lo que habían enajenado, aunque fuese brevemente, y por lo que habían ganado de forma duradera. Por lo que habían conservado y cuidado, y que ahora ella —su actitud era desvergonzada— se apropiaba y disfrutaba. El palazzo Leporelli[37] conservaba aún su historia en su ancho regazo, como un ídolo pintado, una solemne marioneta cubierta de condecoraciones. Lleno de cuadros y de reliquias, el rico pasado veneciano, el carácter imborrable, era una presencia servida y reverenciada: lo que nos devuelve a la realidad de hace un rato: al hecho de que más que nunca, esa mañana de octubre, aunque fuese sólo una torpe novicia, Milly deambulaba despacio de aquí para allá como la sacerdotisa de un culto. Sin duda, la causa era el dulce regusto de la soledad añorada y recuperada, siempre una necesidad de su naturaleza cuando las cosas le hablaban con agudeza. Era en mitad del silencio como mejor le hablaban: entre otras voces se le escapaba su significado. Llevaba semanas rodeada de voces, y había intentado escucharlas, las había cultivado y había respondido: habían sido semanas en las que otras circunstancias bien habrían podido impedirle oír. Había tenido la sensación, más de lo que las perspectivas amenazaban o prometían al principio, de mezclarse con una muchedumbre y un nutrido grupo de acompañantes; las cuatro señoras que le había descrito a *sir* Luke Strett como una falange relativamente reducida habían resultado ser como una bola de nieve que cada día abarcaba más terreno. Susan Shepherd había comparado esa parte del viaje de la joven con el famoso avance de la emperatriz Catalina por las estepas de Rusia[38]; poblados improvisados se alzaban a cada vuelta del camino donde los lugareños aguardaban para pronunciar discursos redactados al estilo londinense. Viejos amigos, en suma, la aguardaban emboscados. De la señora Lowder, de Kate Croy, suyos…; cuando los discursos no eran al estilo londinense, lo eran al estilo más insistente de las ciudades norteamericanas. La corriente creció aún más por las relaciones sociales de Susie; de manera que hubo días, en los hoteles, en las excursiones por los Dolomitas, en los barcos a vapor de los lagos, en los que casi pudo pagar con intereses a la tía Maud y a Kate la deuda contraída por el «éxito» londinense al que ellas habían abierto las puertas.

El éxito de Kate y de la señora Lowder, para sorpresa de los compatriotas de Milly y de la señora Stringham, en realidad estuvo a punto de alcanzar su mejor momento; había sido tan rápido como el éxito al otro lado del océano de la última gran novela inglesa. Esas señoras eran «tan diferentes»… diferentes, como era evidente, de las señoras que así las denominaban, pues sobre todo fueron señoras, a veces hasta una docena a la vez, las que repetían también a la vez en el salón de Milly ésa y otras conclusiones. Las amigas de Milly eran aclamadas no sólo por ser fascinantes en sí mismas —las personas más simpáticas que habían encontrado quienes las aclamaban— sino por ser las ayudantes, desde el punto de vista social, de la excéntrica joven, encargadas, era evidente, de abrirle paso y de allanarle el camino, y tal vez de moderar su excentricidad. Al entender de Milly, breves intervalos podían suponer grandes diferencias, y esa renovada inhalación de su aire natal le había permitido ya intuir que a sus compañeras les parecía extraña y disociada. Al parecer despertaba tanto las críticas como una más bien extraña sorpresa, una benevolencia inducida por una falta de total confianza: todo lo cual la señalaba como una persona demasiado sencilla y demasiado mal vestida para pasar con ella un verdadero buen rato y, al mismo tiempo, demasiado rica y con demasiadas amistades —debidas a la habilidad intuitiva de la joven— para pasar uno malo. A sus compatriotas, en suma, por lo que ella podía apreciar, les parecían bien sus amigas por la experta sabiduría con que la trataban; pero a pesar de semejante sagacidad judicial se consideraban a sí mismos la parte inocente. Esos días vio cosas que nunca había visto y no habría sabido decir por qué, excepto por un principio demasiado terrible para ponerle nombre, pero comprendió que ni Lancaster Gate era lo que Nueva York pensaba, ni Nueva York era lo que pensaba Lancaster Gate cuando coqueteaba con el plan de una serie de visitas a Norteamérica. El plan podría haber sido concebido humorísticamente, por la señora Lowder, para mejorar su posición social: y desde luego tenía en ese sentido aciertos que tal vez sólo se adelantaran medio siglo a su época; a todo lo cual Kate Croy asistía con esa facilidad fría y controlada que casaba tan bien, según decía la gente, con esa belleza tan particular, que le hacía pensar a uno que despacharía las

disputas, las especulaciones y las aspiraciones con unas escuetas palabras dichas con brillantez, tan sencillas en cierto sentido, no obstante, que sonarían, incluso cuando fuesen inocentes, como una jerga más bien exasperada. No era que Kate no hubiese fingido también que le gustaría viajar a Norteamérica; era sólo que Milly había practicado, y en los últimos tiempos más que nunca, las confesiones íntimas, ironías francas y personales que explicaban las muecas que hacían en público y con las que, cara a cara, se quitaban fatigadas la careta.

Quitarse la careta acabó siendo la forma que adoptaron los momentos que pasaban juntas, momentos que no se habían hecho ni más frecuentes ni más prolongados por la fatiga que sentía Milly —como ella misma decía—, cuando se quitaba los arreos. Agitaban, aquellas dos independientes, sus máscaras como si agitaran abanicos españoles; sonreían y suspiraban al quitárselas; pero el gesto, las sonrisas, los suspiros, extrañamente, habrían podido considerarse lo más real de todo. Extrañamente, decimos, porque las dos habrían coincidido en que en general su efusividad guardaba poca proporción con la parafernalia de su alivio. Era entonces cuando se decían que debían dejar de fingir, era entonces cuando lo que callaban se percibía más en el aire. Había una diferencia, sin duda, y sobre todo a favor de Kate: Milly ni siquiera imaginaba lo que podía callar su amiga, lo que tenía, en suma, que ocultar; mientras que para Kate era en comparación más fácil adivinar que la pobre Milly ocultaba un tesoro. No el tesoro de un tímido, abyecto, cariño: la ocultación, en ese particular, pertenecía a una fase muy distinta de esos estados; era más bien un principio de orgullo relativamente osado e implacable, un principio que saltaba igual que un resorte de acero a la menor presión de una pisada cercana. Así de inviolablemente guardada estaba la verdadera opinión de la joven sobre su propia validez; así su hermana triste y sorprendida se veía condenada a contemplarla lastimera desde el otro lado del foso excavado alrededor de su torre. Ciertos aspectos de la relación entre las dos jóvenes nos recuerdan, tal es el crepúsculo que se va formando en torno a ellas, a una de esas escenas oscuras de una obra de Maeterlinck: tenemos claramente la imagen, en la delicada penumbra, de esas figuras tan cercanas y al mismo tiempo tan opuestas, tan mutuamente vigilantes: la de la princesa pálida y angulosa, tocada con plumas de avestruz, con una túnica negra, cubierta de amuletos, recordatorios, reliquias, casi siempre sentada, casi siempre inmóvil, y la de la dama erguida e inquieta de su corte que, mientras describe lentos círculos, intercambia con ella, a través del agua oscura veteada de destellos del atardecer, preguntas y respuestas caprichosas. La dama erguida, con las trenzas gruesas y oscuras sobre la espalda, arrastra por la hierba la cola bordada de su vestido, completa la vuelta y vuelve a empezar, y la conversación interrumpida, breve y sin apenas alusiones, parece ocultar más que liberar su sentido. La explicación es que, cuando de verdad no tienen que pensar en los demás, se encuentran en un ambiente que parece esperar ansioso sus palabras. Semejante impresión era de hecho grave, y podría ser trágica; por lo que de manera sencilla, por fin sistemática, se decidían a medir bien sus palabras.

No podía decírsele sin más a Milly, en particular, que si no fuese tan orgullosa probablemente habría sido más fácil compadecerla (más fácil para la persona que la compadeciera); no podía haber prueba hablada, ni demostración más contundente que la actitud coherente y considerada, que el hecho de que esa maravillosa mezcla de su debilidad y de su fuerza, su peligro, por así decirlo, y su opción, la hacía, la conservaba, irresistiblemente interesante. La dificultad de Kate era, finalmente, la misma a la que se enfrentaba la señora Stringham; y la propia Susan Shepherd, en nuestra escena de Maeterlinck, podría haber rondado bajo el crepúsculo al lado del foso. Podría decirse a favor de Kate, en cualquier caso, que su sinceridad con su amiga, todo ese tiempo, fue mucha, su imaginación compasiva, fuerte; y que esas cosas le daban una virtud, una buena conciencia, una credibilidad en sí misma, por así decirlo, que luego serían preciosas para ella. Comprendía con su aguda inteligencia la lógica de su mutua duplicidad, pasaba sin ayuda la mismas pruebas como otra callada seguidora de Milly, veía fácilmente que para la joven ser explícita equivalía a traicionar adivinaciones, gratitudes, atisbos del contraste intuido entre su fortuna y su temor: todo lo cual habría contradicho su sistemática bravuconería. De eso se trataba, comprendía asombrada Kate: reconocerlo equivalía a causar una avalancha, la avalancha que Milly aguardaba nerviosa y que podía iniciarse por el más leve aliento; aunque era menos probable que fuese el aliento ahogado de sus propias quejas que el de la compasión vana, la inferencia impotente y boquiabierta de los demás. Con tantas limitaciones así, por tanto, entre ellas, retirarse a quitarse la careta debía reducirse, como hemos sugerido, a una cuestión nominal, bastante bien representada por una alegría cuando cesaba la cháchara. La cháchara había acompañado ciertamente sus pasos, pero ellas aprovechaban a propósito esa visión desoladora para tener disponible, cuando estuvieran cara a cara, una opinión sobre alguna cosa. El alivio de quitarse los arreos: ésa era la moraleja de sus encuentros; pero la moraleja, a su vez, era que no podían ni siquiera preguntarse por qué tenían que ponérselos. Milly los llevaba a modo de armadura.

Ahora se los había quitado, por alguna razón, y hacía semanas que no estaba así; es decir, siempre se los

quitaba cuando estaba a solas, y sus acompañantes nunca le habían parecido tan lejanos y ausentes como en ese momento. Era como si una vez más, de manera aún más tácita y extraordinaria, Eugenio la hubiese entendido, sin necesidad de palabras, brillante y audaz, con la excusa, por ejemplo de que hacía muy buen día: «Sí, consígame una hora a solas; lléveselos… me da igual adónde: entreténgalos, diviértalos, secuéstrelos, ahóguelos, mátelos si quiere, pero necesito estar un rato a solas y averiguar dónde estoy». Milly era consciente de lo extremado de su impaciencia, pues le había entregado a Susie junto con los demás: Susie, que se habría ahogado por su causa, entregada a un monstruo mercenario para que le consiguiera un instante de tregua. Qué raras eran las vueltas de la vida y los caprichos de la debilidad; qué raras las vacilaciones de la fantasía y los engaños de la esperanza; pero, a pesar de todo, esos experimentos con la verdad que consistían, en el peor de los casos, en engañarse a una misma eran legítimos… ¿no? Ahora estaba divirtiéndose con la idea de que Eugenio podría ayudarla en todo: le había insinuado, siempre con observaciones insondables, la idea, hasta entonces inconcebible, del perfecto uso que podía dar a su fortuna, una especie de contraataque contra el destino. Quedó claro para los dos que era absurdo que con tanto dinero pudiera necesitar estúpida y absurdamente más una vida, una carrera, una conciencia, de lo que necesitaba una casa, un carruaje o un cocinero. Fue como si hubiese hecho una especie de cálculo profesional de lo que en caso de apuro podría hacer por ella, con una precisión que, ya puestos, Milly comparó con la vaguedad de *sir* Luke Strett quien —al menos en el palazzo Leporelli por las mañanas— le parecía casi un aficionado. *Sir* Luke no le había dicho: «Usted pague lo suficiente y déjeme a mí lo demás», que era claramente lo que insinuaba Eugenio. *Sir* Luke parecía haber hablado de compras y pagos, pero en otro tipo de efectivo. Las suyas eran cantidades que no podían nombrarse ni calcularse, y que además ella no estaba segura de tener a su disposición. Eugenio —ésa era la diferencia— podía nombrar, podía calcular y sus precios nunca la habían asustado. Dios sabía que había estado dispuesta a pagar lo bastante por cualquier cosa, por todo, y ahora se trataba sólo de reconsiderar lo que era una cantidad suficiente. Se divertía —a eso se reducía todo, ya que Eugenio siempre estaba ahí para firmar el recibo— pensando si podría hacer frente a las facturas. Estaba más preparada que nunca para pagar bastante y también más que nunca para pagar demasiado. ¿De qué servía si no —si en esas cosas fallaba tu criado de confianza— ser, como decían las queridas Susies de este mundo, una princesa en un palacio?

Recorrió sola el noble y tranquilo palacio mientras la brisa veraniega del mar agitaba aquí y allá una cortina o una persiana y se colaba en aquellos espacios velados. Tuvo la visión de aferrarse a eso: de que tal vez Eugenio podría arreglarlo. Estaba a bordo, como en el arca de su diluvio, y embargada por una ternura que ¿por qué no iba a poder servir de justificación suficiente? Nunca, nunca, la abandonaría. Se comprometería; no pediría más que quedarse allí esperando y flotar y flotar. La belleza y la intensidad, el verdadero alivio momentáneo de aquella idea llegó a su apogeo con la intención definitiva de plantearle la cuestión a Eugenio a su regreso como no se la había planteado nunca; aunque sus planes, debemos añadir, se vieron frustrados cuando, al regresar al gran salón donde había iniciado su pensativo paseo, encontró a lord Mark, de cuya llegada a Venecia nada sabía, y a quien —mientras uno de los criados la buscaba por las habitaciones vacías— habían pedido que esperase. Había esperado, lord Mark, estaba esperando… oh, sin duda; nunca le había dado tanto la impresión de ser un hombre capaz de esperar con paciencia, casi agradecido de que le diesen ocasión de hacerlo, aunque al mismo tiempo con una especie de elocuente firmeza. Lo raro, recordaría después, fue que su sorpresa al verlo allí no fuese inmediata, sino que se produjera al cabo de cinco minutos; y también, con cierta incoherencia, que casi se alegrase de verle y le disculpara por haber perturbado su soledad, como si hubiera estado pensando en él o se hubiese presentado a instancias suyas. Era, en el mejor de los casos, el final de una tregua; por más que una lo apreciara era inevitable notar que su presencia perturbaba su inapreciable soledad más que la de cualquier otro de sus conocidos: a pesar de lo cual, como no era ni la querida Susie, ni la querida Kate, ni la querida tía Maud, ni siquiera, ya puestos, el querido Eugenio en persona, verlo no cambió su sensación de haber alejado a sus amigos. No había estado tan a solas con él desde aquella ocasión en que le enseñó el magnífico retrato en Matcham, la ocasión que había señalado exactamente el punto culminante de su seguridad, la ocasión en la que sus propias lágrimas, de las que tanto se había avergonzado, fueron el indicio de que estaba rodeando conscientemente el promontorio que la protegía y se disponía a abandonar el golfo azul del desconocimiento y a adentrarse en el mar proceloso. Su presencia ahora se refirió a su presencia entonces, le recordó lo amable que había sido en Matcham y le dijo, inesperadamente, en un momento en que podía sentirlo especialmente, que, gracias a esa amabilidad y a la belleza de lo que recordaban juntos, no lo había perdido… más bien al contrario. Recibirle con cortesía, recibirle allí, verlo interesado y hechizado, además de claramente encantado por haberla encontrado sin nadie que pudiera molestarles: todo le resultó tan agradable esos primeros minutos que podían haber sido para él un feliz augurio.

Le habló de sus compañeros sin que él lograra interesarse por ellos, aunque atribuyó su aparición, tan inesperada, a un impulso obedecido sin pensarlo. Estaba tiritando en Carlsbad, postergado y azulado, cuando le acometió; así que, como sabía dónde se encontraban, se limitó a subir al primer tren. Explicó cómo había sabido de su paradero: lo había sabido —¿qué podía ser más natural?— por sus amigos, los de Milly y los suyos. No tardó en aludir a ellos, pero curiosamente fue entonces cuando la joven fue consciente de lo que se estaba preguntando para sus adentros a propósito de sus motivos. Reparó en que había utilizado el plural, lo cual incluía a la señora Lowder o incluía a Kate; pero enseguida reparó también en que eso no explicaba nada. La tía Maud le había escrito, Kate al parecer —y esto era interesante— le había escrito; pero era de esperar que su propósito no había sido que fuese a presentarse allí, aliviado de no tener que aplazar más el momento de verlas. Tan sólo dijo «¡Ah!» y otra vez «¡Ah!», cuando le contó cómo ocuparían probablemente la mañana al cuidado de Eugenio y de la señora Stringham, y las dos veces sonó como si cualquier sugerencia de que fuera a buscarlos al Rialto o el Puente de los Suspiros fuese a dejarle frío. Eso fue lo que, al cabo de un rato, puso freno de manera oscura pero directa a su confianza. Había sabido dónde se encontraban por los demás, pero no era por los demás por quienes había ido. Eso, extrañamente, fue una lástima, pues, y aún resulta más extraño decirlo, ella habría podido fiarse más de él si hubiese sido más claro. Se quedó tan helada cuando adivinó sus verdaderas intenciones que sólo por el placer de ser justa con él, sólo por el placer de recordar juntos Matcham y el Bronzino, el apogeo de su felicidad, le habría suplicado, razonado y desengañado a tiempo. En esos diez minutos, la franqueza de su bienvenida y el modo evidente en que le había complacido compensaron, sin que él se diera cuenta, si es que podían compensarlo, que al principio, en la primera cena en casa de la tía Maud, por ejemplo, ella hubiese dudado de si era del todo humano. Esa primera cena de la tía Maud se sumó al rato pasado en Matcham, se sumó a otras cosas, y consolidó, gracias a su presente benevolencia, la naturalidad de su relación e hizo que de pronto fuese maravilloso que se hubiese presentado de ese modo. Al contemplar la belleza del palacio exclamó: «¡Qué templo del buen gusto y qué expresión del orgullo de la vida, y, aun así, qué hermoso hogar!», por lo que, para entretenerlo, ella pudo ofrecerse a enseñárselo, aunque le dio a entender que acababa de recorrerlo por motivos personales y que lo había apreciado todo con más sensibilidad que antes. Él aceptó su ofrecimiento sin ningún escrúpulo y pareció alegrarse de encontrarla tan sensible.

IV

No habría sabido decir qué fue lo que, en aquellas condiciones, renovó toda la solemnidad, pero al cabo de veinte minutos una especie de silencio melancólico se había abatido sobre ambos, como si se hallasen en presencia de algo conmovedor de lo que también participara su visitante. En realidad no fue más que la perfección del hechizo, o su sensación de exclusión y desamparo ante el mismo. El hechizo les mostró un rostro frío y bello, con una poesía que nunca sería suya, que hablaba con una sonrisa irónica de una vida posible, pero prohibida. De nuevo, abrumó a Milly: «¡Oh, la aventura imposible!»… La aventura para ella, una vez más, habría sido quedarse allí para siempre, toda la vida, como en una fortaleza; y la idea adoptó la forma de no bajar nunca, de quedarse suspendida en el aire divino y sin mácula, donde no oiría más que el salpicar del agua contra la piedra. El suelo que pisaban estaba a cierta altura y le inspiró esa melancólica fantasía.

—¡Ay, no bajar… no bajar nunca, nunca! —le dijo a su amigo con un extraño suspiro.

—Pero ¿por qué no iba usted a bajar —preguntó él—, teniendo como tiene esa enorme escalera antigua del patio? Por supuesto, tendría que haber siempre gente con vestidos sacados de Veronese[39] en lo alto y al pie observándola.

Ella movió la cabeza con frivolidad y tristeza al ver que no la había entendido.

—Ni siquiera para gente con vestidos sacados de Veronese. Lo que digo es que la verdadera belleza radica en que no haría falta bajar. De hecho —añadió—, no me muevo. No he salido. Me quedo en casa. Por eso me ha encontrado usted, felizmente.

Lord Mark se sorprendió: era, ¡oh, sí!, apropiadamente humano.

—¿No sale a pasear?

Ella contempló el palacio, el piso de arriba de las habitaciones donde lo había recibido, la sala que correspondía a la sala de abajo y cuyos arcos góticos daban al Gran Canal. Las ventanas entre los arcos estaban abiertas, la cornisa del balcón era ancha, la vista del canal, desde aquella altura, admirable, y el aleteo de las cortinas blancas una invitación a no habría sabido decir qué. Pero al cabo de un rato no hubo ningún misterio; nunca se había sentido tan invitada a vivir allí mismo y sin más su aventura. Sería —volvió otra vez a lo mismo— la aventura de no moverse.

—Paseo por aquí.

—¿Quiere decir —preguntó enseguida lord Mark— que, en realidad, no se encuentra bien?

Estaban ante la ventana, haciendo una pausa, demorándose, con los bellos, descoloridos y antiguos palacios enfrente y la lenta marea del Adriático a sus pies; pero al cabo de un minuto, y antes de responder, ella cerró los ojos y apoyó irresistiblemente la cara sobre los brazos, que descansaban en la albardilla. Se había arrodillado sobre el almohadón que había al pie de la ventana, y se quedó allí, sumida en un largo silencio, con la frente hacia abajo. Sabía que su silencio era en sí mismo una respuesta directa, pero se sentía incapaz de afirmar que podía seguir adelante. A otros, por ejemplo, a un hombre como Merton Densher, no les habría permitido sacar a relucir siquiera la cuestión, y se preguntó qué significaría lo que sentía por lord Mark para que al oírla de sus labios hubiese estado a punto de ceder. En realidad, era sin duda porque apenas le interesaba; dejarse llevar así en su presencia, dejar que su roce desbordara la copa, sería el alivio —pues lo cierto era que sus nervios necesitaban alivio— menos costoso. Además, si había ido a verla con las intenciones que suponía, o incluso si dicha intención la había determinado el hechizo de la situación, lord Mark no debía confundirse respecto a su valor: pues ¿qué valor tenía ella ahora? Allí arrodillada se estremeció al pensar que no tenía ninguno; aunque, conteniéndose, sin decir nada aún, intentó recuperar lo más posible. Entonces tuvo una revelación: ¿no radicaría su valor, para el hombre que se casara con ella, precisamente en los estragos de su enfermedad? Ella podía no durar, pero su dinero sí duraría. Para un hombre cuya visión del dinero fuese intensa y para quien constituyera el principal motivo

para interesarse por ella, cualquier perspectiva de que no fuese a seguir mucho tiempo en este mundo podía constituir fácilmente un verdadero aliciente. Un hombre así, decidido a complacerla, persuadirla, hacerla suya el tiempo, corto o largo, que la naturaleza y los médicos permitieran, estaría dispuesto a poner a mal tiempo buena cara, por muy enferma, deteriorada o desagradable que estuviese, pensando en los beneficios futuros, pues era evidente que, con toda probabilidad, ella sabría ser generosa con un marido afligido y desconsolado.

A veces se había dicho a sí misma, de manera general, que cualesquiera que fuesen los hábitos que adoptara su juventud, el de ver un pretendiente interesado detrás de cada esquina no llegaría a ser uno de ellos, actitud que desde muy pronto había juzgado tan innoble, tan perniciosa. Por ello había procurado evitarla en lo posible, y apenas supo por qué en ese momento se había sorprendido a sí misma atribuyéndole a lord Mark un motivo tan indigno. No acababa de encajar, aquel motivo indigno, con los fríos ojos ingleses de lord Mark; en cualquier caso, su imaginación sólo consideró un instante sus aspectos más sombríos. Y además, de ese modo, las sospechas se simplificaron: había una buena razón —en realidad dos— para que los motivos de su acompañante careciesen de importancia. Uno era que, aunque estuviese dispuesto a aceptarla sin un penique, no se casaría con él por nada del mundo; el otro que, a fin de cuentas, le pareció amable, sensible, agradable y humanamente preocupado por ella. Había además otras dos cosas: su intención de portarse bien o muy bien con ella, y que empezaba a notarla amenazada, obsesionada, desolada; pero ambas se estaban fundiendo en una sola haciendo que, al combinarse, se convenciera aún más de que, como probablemente lo formulase para sus adentros, le gustaba. Eso era lo que le constaba: que le gustaba de verdad y que era capaz de conciliarlo con el accidente de su debilidad. ¿De verdad habría preferido —podía preguntarse Milly— que le desconcertara o asqueara? Si pudiera conmoverlo lo bastante para que actuase como ella quería y no planteara preguntas ni exigiera explicaciones, podría ayudarla mucho más que dándole sólo ocasión de rechazarlo. Una vez más, una vez más, era extraño, pero en ese momento le pareció su único simpatizante fiable. Hablar con los demás habría empeorado las cosas, pero con él no temía que pudiera torcer el gesto o empalidecer. Lo conservaría, es decir, conservaría su única relación fácil, en el sentido de que era fácil para él. Su presente perspectiva tenía tanto encanto, lo que les rodeaba por dentro y por fuera hacía que un silencio admirado resultara tan natural como en la ópera, hasta el punto de que no tuvo la sensación de haberle hecho esperar demasiado cuando, por fin, en lugar de decir si estaba enferma o no, repitió:

—Paseo por aquí. No me canso. Ni me cansaré… Me gusta tanto… Me encanta este sitio —prosiguió— y no tengo ninguna intención de marcharme.

—Yo tampoco la tendría si tuviese su suerte. Pero aun así, a pesar de la suerte, toda la… ¿De verdad quiere quedarse a vivir aquí?

—Creo que me gustaría —respondió la pobre Milly al cabo de un instante— morir aquí.

Y eso precisamente hizo reír a lord Mark. Era lo que la joven quería oír en quienes se preocupaban por ella: era la forma más humana y amable, sin abismos de oscuridad.

—¡Oh, no es lo bastante bueno para eso! ¡Hay que elegir muy bien! Pero ¿no podría seguir alquilándolo? Es, ya me entiende, un sitio ideal para usted; está usted a la altura de su renombre, se basta sola para llenarlo, poblarlo, y se me ocurren cosas mucho peores, peores, digo, para sus amigos, que el que pasara aquí tres o cuatro meses al año. Sin embargo, no me parece indicado para el resto del tiempo. Uno tiene otros planes para usted.

—¿Qué planes? —preguntó sonriente—. ¿Matarme?

—¿Insinúa que en Inglaterra la mataríamos?

—Bueno, le he visto a usted y me asusta. Son ustedes demasiado para mí… y también demasiados. Inglaterra está llena de incógnitas espinosas. Esto, como bien acaba de decir, encaja mejor conmigo.

—¡Ja, ja! —lord Mark volvió a reírse como para darle la razón—. En ese caso ¿no podría comprarlo… por una cantidad? Le aseguro que se lo venderán. Si les ofrece lo suficiente.

—Es justo lo que he pensado —dijo—. Creo que lo intentaré. Pero, si lo consigo, no me moveré de aquí. —Estaban hablando con sinceridad—. Será mi vida… comprada a ese precio. Se convertirá en mi gran concha dorada; y quien quiera encontrarme tendrá que venir a buscarme.

—¡Ah!, entonces estará usted viva —respondió lord Mark.

—Bueno, tal vez no del todo extinguida, pero sí encogida, gastada, marchita como una nuez reseca en su cáscara.

—¡Oh! —replicó lord Mark—, nosotros, por mucho que desconfíe de nosotros, podemos hacer mucho más por usted.

—¿En el sentido de que creen que lo mejor para mí es acabar cuanto antes?

Él dejó que viera que le preocupaba, y después de mirarla un rato, sin los anteojos —que siempre alteraban la expresión de sus ojos—, volvió a colocarse las pinzas en la nariz y a contemplar la vista. Pero la vista, a su vez, lo liberó enseguida.

—¿Recuerda lo que le dije aquel día en Matcham… o al menos lo que quise decirle?

—¡Oh, sí!, recuerdo todo lo que hablamos en Matcham. Es otra vida.

—Desde luego lo será, eso mismo es lo que quiero decir: lo que intenté darle a entender entonces. Matcham, ya me entiende —continuó—, es simbólico. Creo que intenté demostrárselo.

Ella recordaba muy bien lo que había intentado: no había olvidado ni un solo detalle.

—Lo que digo es que parece que fue hace cien años.

—¡Oh!, a mí me parece más reciente. Tal vez lo recuerde en parte —prosiguió— porque sabía muy bien lo que podría decirse que estaba haciendo. Quería que entendiera que tal vez podría cuidar de usted, en fin, bastante mejor… Bastante mejor, por supuesto, que otras personas en particular.

—En particular que la señora Lowder, que la señorita Croy e incluso que la señora Stringham.

—¡Oh, la señora Stringham no es problema! —se corrigió enseguida lord Mark.

Eso la divirtió a pesar de las otras cosas que la angustiaban; y en cualquier caso pudo demostrarle lo poco que, a pesar de los cien años, había olvidado lo que le estaba insinuando. Que estuviese con ella en ese instante sirvió de hecho para que el otro momento fuese tan vívido que estuvo a punto de romper a llorar como había hecho entonces.

—Podría hacer eso por mí, sí. Le comprendí perfectamente.

—Quise, entiéndame —se explicó pese a todo—, reafirmar su confianza. Ya me entiende, en el lugar indicado.

—Bueno, lord Mark, pues lo consiguió: mi confianza está justo ahora donde la dejó usted entonces. La única diferencia —dijo Milly— es que ahora no sé muy bien qué hacer con ella. Además —prosiguió—, tengo la sensación de que está usted dispuesto a socavarla un poco.

Él prestó tan poca atención a estas últimas palabras como si no las hubiese dicho, y se limitó a mirarla bajo una luz que poco a poco fue volviéndose diferente.

—¿De verdad está usted en un aprieto?

Milly, a su vez, no le hizo caso. Comprendió que esa luz también podía servirle a ella.

—No diga, no intente decir nada que sea imposible. Puede usted hacer cosas mucho mejores.

Él consideró su respuesta y luego fue más allá.

—Es monstruoso que uno no pueda preguntarle como amigo lo que tanto ansía saber.

—Y ¿qué quiere saber? —Habló, con un cambio brusco, con una leve aspereza—. ¿Si estoy enferma de gravedad?

El tono en que lo dijo, aunque no levantara la voz, revistió la idea de una especie de terror, aunque de terror para los demás. Lord Mark torció el gesto y se ruborizó, era evidente que no había podido evitarlo; pero logró dominarse e incluso habló con una vivacidad desacostumbrada.

—¿Es que cree que puedo verla sufrir y no decir palabra?

—No me verá sufrir… No tema. No seré un engorro público. Creo que por eso me gusta este sitio: es tan hermoso y sin embargo alejado… No se enterará usted de nada —añadió; y luego, como para concluir con decisión—: ¡No saben nada! No, ni siquiera usted. —Él la miró con un vestigio de su primera expresión, y ella vio con idéntica claridad que, por su parte, estaba desconcertado; entonces quiso asegurarse de no haber sido desconsiderada. Sería amable de una vez por todas y ya está—: Estoy muy enferma.

—Y ¿no hace nada?

—Hago todo. Todo es esto mismo —sonrió—. Lo que estoy haciendo ahora mismo. Una no puede hacer más que vivir.

—Más que vivir como hay que vivir, no. Pero ¿es eso lo que hace? ¿Por qué no consulta a alguien?

Lord Mark había observado la elegancia rococó como si hubiese cincuenta cosas que no pudiera ofrecerle, y aludió precisamente a la más improbable. Pero ella respondió con una sonrisa.

—He consultado al mejor. Estoy siguiendo sus consejos. Por eso le he recibido y estoy hablando con usted. Como le he dicho, una no puede hacer más que vivir.

—¡Oh, vivir! —exclamó lord Mark.

—Bueno, para mí tiene una importancia inmensa. —Hablaba por fin como para divertirse; ahora que le había dicho la verdad, que él la había oído de sus labios como no la había oído nadie, su emoción se había agotado. Ahí estaba; pero era como si no fuese a poder hablar jamás—. No me lo habré perdido todo.

—¿Por qué tendría que perderse usted nada? —Ella notó, por su tono de voz, que en menos de un minuto, él había tomado su decisión—. Es usted la persona en el mundo para quien es menos necesario,

para quien parece casi imposible, para quien «perderse» algo requeriría sin duda una extraordinaria cantidad de fuerza de voluntad mal encaminada. Ya que cree en los consejos, por el amor de Dios, acepte el mío. Sé lo que usted quiere.

¡Oh!, ya suponía que lo sabría. Ella había propiciado, o casi, esa respuesta. Sin embargo, le habló con dulzura:

—Creo que lo que quiero es no preocuparme demasiado.

—Quiere que la adoren —soltó por fin lord Mark—. Nada le preocuparía a usted menos. Digo, como yo lo haré. Eso es —dijo con firmeza—. No es usted lo bastante querida.

—Lo bastante ¿para qué, lord Mark?

—Pues para disfrutarlo plenamente.

En fin, después de todo, Milly no se burló de él.

—Entiendo lo que dice. Disfrutarlo plenamente consiste en verse una obligada a corresponder ese amor. —Lo había entendido, pero dudó—. Su idea ¿es que podría verme obligada a quererlo a usted?

—¡Oh… «obligada»! —Era tan delicado y tan experto, tan sensible a cualquier cosa mínimamente ridícula, y hablar de pasión se avenía tan poco con él… era tanto todas esas cosas que por fuerza tenía que darse cuenta. Y lo hizo con el tono mismo de sus palabras, de una manera exquisita. A Milly volvió a gustarle, le gustaba por esos matices, le gustaba tanto que era una lástima ver cómo lo estropeaba, y aún más tener que incluirlo entre esos encantos menores de la existencia que a veces la dejaban sin aliento al recordar que tenía que renunciar a ellos—. ¿Es inconcebible que pueda intentarlo?

—¿Dejarme impresionar favorablemente por usted…?

—Creer en mí. Creer en mí —repitió lord Mark.

Ella volvió a dudar.

—¿Intentarlo a cambio de que lo intente usted?

—¡Oh, yo no necesito intentarlo! —declaró él enseguida.

Sonó espontáneo y claro; sin embargo, su modo de esquivar su pregunta, sin verdadera expresión, como él mismo comprendió instantes después con inteligencia, impotencia y casi comicidad, fue un fracaso acentuado además por la risa que soltó enseguida Milly. Como indicio de una pasión sanadora y edificante fue ciertamente deficiente; no serviría para comunicar una fuerza capaz de arrastrarlos a ambos. Y lo bueno de lord Mark era que también él, incluso en el momento de persuadir, de persuadirse a sí mismo, era capaz de darse cuenta, y por tanto sólo podía indicar que lo mejor de él encajaba en el agradable negocio de la prosperidad. Tal como le dio a entender, el modo en que ella lo veía lo apartaba, por sí mismo, de cualquier servicio peligroso, y eso era una discriminación nunca vista en su contra, al menos que él supiera. Nacido para flotar suspendido en el aire, ése sería su primer encuentro con un juicio formado bajo la luz siniestra de la tragedia. Las crecientes tinieblas del mundo personal de Milly eran para él, a juicio de la joven, un elemento en el que era vano fingir que se encontraba cómodo, pues estaba cargado de depresiones y perdiciones, con el escalofrío de la partida perdida. Casi sin necesidad de hablar, y sólo por el hecho de que, en tal caso, no podía haber un digno sustituto de una intensidad sentida, no le quedó otro remedio que reconocer que, en la práctica, tenía miedo, ya fuese de quejarse falsamente o sólo de lo que pudiera llegar a ser desagradable en un posible compromiso, aunque eso apenas tuviera importancia. Además a Milly le pareció adivinar, era una joven maravillosa, que él no había contado con tener que quejarse de nada que no fuese su propia conveniencia, de nada, en suma, que no le permitiesen su disposición, sus costumbres, también su educación y sus medios personales. Su situación, por tanto, no podía resultarle agradable y ella se la habría evitado de buena gana si él no la hubiese propiciado. A ningún hombre, Milly era consciente, le gustaría que le dijesen que no servía para lo que ella habría llamado su realidad. No habría hecho falta mucho más para que la joven pudiera entender que él era capaz de insinuar —si hubiese expresado sus más íntimos sentimientos— que lo más conveniente, por su propio interés, era bajar el tono y disfrazar la desagradable realidad. Estaba dispuesto a llegar a un compromiso con la realidad, pero la realidad también debía llegar a un compromiso con él. Lo que Milly sentía al respecto, con un respaldo financiero tan evidente, no podía, o no quería, adaptarse a él y en cuanto lo descubrió se perfiló en su rostro como la marca de una bofetada. Había señalado el minuto exacto en que podía haberle vuelto a parecer conmovedor. Cuando intentó insistir una vez más, había dejado de serlo.

Para entonces ella se había apartado de la ventana en una maniobra de distracción, lo había conducido por otros salones, había aludido una vez más a su encanto interior, e incluso había llegado a insistir en su independencia moral al repetir que si una tuviese una casa así, y la quisiera y la cuidara lo suficiente, la casa correspondería y la protegería de todo mal. Lord Mark se aferró ese cuarto de hora a la pértiga que ella le tendía, es decir, se aferró con una mano, pues Milly notó que con la otra se agarraba a su propia

intuición; pues, para hacerle justicia, no era tan estúpido ni estaba tan contrariado como para no saber comportarse más o menos como si no hubiese pasado nada. Uno de sus méritos, al que ella también supo hacer justicia, era que la idea tanto adquirida como innata que tenía de su propia conducta se basaba en el supuesto general de que nada —nada que supusiera una diferencia mortal para él— podía sucederle. Era, desde el punto de vista social, una opinión como cualquier otra, y los ayudó a salir relativamente bien librados de su aventura. No obstante, de vuelta en el piso de abajo, cuando el fin de la visita era inminente y estaba ya todo dicho, ella volvió a notar que estaba molesto y que, extrañamente, expresaba esa molestia con otra alusión probablemente sincera a su estado de salud. Es posible que estuviese intentando convertir en una ofensa que ella lo hubiese rechazado por una compasión que, por su parte, no había podido ser más exquisita.

—De todos modos es cierto y tanto me da que intente disimularlo. —Era como si el pobre hombre quisiera demostrarle lo poco que le importaba—. Todo el mundo sabe que el amor a menudo ve cosas en las que no repara la indiferencia. Por eso me he dado cuenta.

—¿Está seguro? —dijo la joven con una sonrisa—. Creía que era el amor el que era ciego.

—Ciego para los defectos, no para la belleza —respondió sin más lord Mark.

—¿Acaso le parecen bellas mis preocupaciones más íntimas, mis complicaciones puramente domésticas que me avergüenza haberle dejado entrever?

—Sí, para quienes se preocupan por usted… como hace todo el mundo. Todo en usted es hermoso. Además, no creo —declaró— en la seriedad de lo que me dice. Es demasiado absurdo que pueda hallarse usted en un trance irresoluble. Si usted no puede resolverlo, me gustaría saber quién puede. Es usted la primera entre las jóvenes de su época. Lo digo con sinceridad. —Y hay que admitir que parecía sincero, no entusiasmado, pero sí lúcido, tan competente, en esa posición, para comparar, que su afirmación tuvo la fuerza tal vez no de un tributo, pero sí de una garantía—. Todos la queremos. Lo diré así sin la menor pretensión personal, por si le resulta a usted más fácil. Hablo como integrante de un grupo. Usted no ha nacido sólo para atormentarnos: ha nacido para hacernos felices. Y por lo tanto tiene que escucharnos.

Ella movió la cabeza con su acostumbrada lentitud, pero en esta ocasión con mucha dulzura.

—No, no tengo que escucharle… Es justo lo que no tengo que hacer. La razón es, sencillamente, que me hace sufrir. Puedo estar tan unida a ustedes como quieran, ya que se portan tan bien conmigo. A cambio les doy mi convicción más absoluta de lo que sería… —y se contuvo un instante—. Doy, doy y doy… ya lo ve; siga cerca de mí y verá si no es cierto. Pero no puedo escuchar, ni recibir, ni aceptar… no puedo consentir. No puedo hacer un trato, de verdad. Debe usted creerme. Es lo único que he querido decirle, ¿por qué eso iba a estropear nada?

Él dejó sin responder su pregunta… aunque claramente, podría parecer, porque, por una u otra razón, se habían estropeado muchas cosas.

—Quiere usted a otro —respondió con buena o mala fe y ella volvió a mover la cabeza. Él lo repitió como si su convencimiento no pudiera ser mayor—. Quiere a otro, quiere a otro…

Después Milly se preguntaría si en ese momento no había estado a punto de decir algo enfático y vulgar: «¡Bueno, en cualquier caso no le quiero a usted!». Lo que ocurrió más bien fue que su lástima fue mayor que su irritación: la tristeza, tan vívida para ella, de verlo penosamente desorientado, vagando por un desierto en el que no había alimentos para él, era que su error equivalía a una auténtica maldad. Además estaba tan familiarizada con otra esfera tan distinta de las habilidades de lord Mark que creyó haber cometido una falta de delicadeza al permitirle insistir. ¿Por qué no le había parado los pies al notar sus intenciones? Ahora sólo podía hacerlo con la insinuación que había procurado no hacer.

—¿Sabe?, creo que no está procediendo usted muy bien, y no lo digo porque le esté escuchando. Eso tampoco está bien, aunque no le presto mucha atención. No tendría que haber venido a Venecia para verme… De hecho no ha venido por mí, y no debería actuar como si así fuese. Tiene amigas mucho más antiguas que yo, y también mucho mejores. La verdad es que, si ha venido, sólo puede haber sido apropiada y, si me lo permite, honorablemente, por la mejor amiga que, según creo, tiene usted en el mundo.

Extrañamente, cuando se lo dijo, él se lo tomó como si más o menos se lo esperase. Aun así la miró fijamente y estuvieron un rato así, sin que ninguno de los dos pronunciara un nombre, cada cual decidido, al parecer, a que lo hiciera el otro. Al final, la leve coacción de Milly resultó ser más fuerte.

—¿La señorita Croy? —preguntó lord Mark.

Milly esbozó una sonrisa imperceptible.

—La señora Lowder. —Él comprendió y se ruborizó ante aquella demostración de que era, en comparación, un ingenuo—. En conjunto, me parece la mejor. No creo que ningún hombre pueda pedir más.

Sin apartar los ojos de ella, lord Mark respondió:

—¿Quiere que me case con la señora Lowder?

¡Entonces fue Milly quien pensó que era él quien rozaba la vulgaridad! Pero no estaba dispuesta a tolerarlo.

—Sabe muy bien lo que digo, lord Mark. No es como si le dejase solo en el mundo. Creo que no se enfrenta usted a un mundo solitario —prosiguió—, le aguarda un mundo cálido, ansioso y expectante en cuanto se decida usted a aceptarlo.

Él no se movió, se quedaron plantados sobre el suelo de mármol pulido y, a los pocos minutos, él volvió a coger el sombrero.

—¿Quiere que me case con Kate Croy?

—Quien lo quiere es la señora Lowder… No creo hacer mal al decírselo; además, ella da por sentado que usted lo sabe.

En fin, él demostró que sabía tomárselo con elegancia; y, por su parte, a ella no se le ocultó que era un consuelo estar tratando con un caballero.

—Es muy amable por su parte, al preocuparse así por mis oportunidades. Pero ¿qué sentido tendría que me decidiera por la señorita Croy?

Milly se alegró de poder decírselo.

—Pues que es la joven más guapa, inteligente y encantadora que conozco, y que si yo fuese hombre sencillamente la adoraría. De hecho lo hago. —Fue un lujo de respuesta.

—¡Oh, mi querida amiga!, mucha gente la adora. Pero eso no significa que lo hagan todos.

—¡Ah! —respondió ella—, ya sé como es la gente. Lo que es malo para unos es bueno para otros. No veo que tenga usted que temer nada de nadie —dijo—, a no ser que se comporte de manera insensata conmigo.

Nada más decirlo comprendió que él se estaba aprovechando de algo que ella no sabía.

—¿Cree usted, ya que estamos hablando de estas cosas, que la joven que describe en términos tan encomiásticos está libre?

—Bueno, lord Mark, tendrá que comprobarlo. Es una persona excelente. Pero no sea usted tan humilde. —Casi se sentía alegre.

Al parecer, eso fue finalmente demasiado para él.

—Pero ¿de verdad no lo sabe?

Por supuesto, semejante desafío, en la práctica, a lo más elemental que ella pretendía saber, la empujó a hablarle con franqueza.

—Sí, me consta que hay cierta persona que está muy enamorada de ella.

—Entonces, por la misma regla de tres, debe saber que ella también está muy enamorada de cierta persona.

—¡Ah, perdone usted! —exclamó Milly y se ruborizó de que se le pudiera imputar un error tan grosero —. Está muy equivocado.

—Entonces ¿no es cierto?

—No.

La mirada de lord Mark se trocó en una sonrisa.

—¿Está usted muy, muy segura?

—Tan segura —su actitud lo corroboraba— como pueda estarlo una si tiene todas las garantías. Lo sé de buena fuente.

Él vaciló.

—¿Por la señora Lowder?

—No. La señora Lowder no me parece una buena fuente.

—¡Oh!, creía que hace un rato me estaba usted diciendo —se burló— que es maravillosa en todos los sentidos.

—Lo es para usted —no pudo ser más clara—. Para usted —prosiguió— no la hay mejor. Ella no cree lo que acaba usted de decir y sin duda sabe que ni siquiera lo tiene en cuenta. Puede usted saberlo por ella. Yo lo sé por… —pero Milly se contuvo con el temblor mismo de su énfasis.

—¿Por Kate?

—Por Kate misma.

—¿Que no quiere a nadie?

—A nadie. —Luego prosiguió con la misma intensidad—. Me ha dado su palabra.

—¡Ah! —dijo lord Mark. Y luego añadió—: Y ¿a qué llama usted su palabra?

Milly, por su parte, lo miró admirada… aunque tal vez por el instinto de ganar tiempo al ver que había

dicho más de lo que pretendía.

—Caramba, lord Mark, y ¿a qué llamaría usted su palabra?

—¡Ah!, no soy quién para decirlo. Yo no le he preguntado. Usted sí, por lo visto.

Bueno, eso la puso a la defensiva, sobre todo por Kate.

—Nos hemos hecho muy amigas —dijo al cabo de un instante—; así que, sin necesidad de ser indiscreta, me cuenta cosas.

Lord Mark sonrió como si la conclusión le pareciese desmañada.

—¿Quiere decir que le ha hecho sin más esa confidencia?

Milly volvió a quedarse pensativa, aunque más incómoda que auxiliada por el modo en que se miraron a los ojos, como si cada cual viese en el otro más de lo que decía. Sobre todo le pareció discernir una extraña disposición, por parte de su acompañante, a dudar de la veracidad de Kate. Como es lógico, se creyó obligada a defenderla.

—Quiero decir lo que he dicho: que cuando me contó que no tenía ningún…

—¿Se lo prometió a usted? —la interrumpió lord Mark.

Milly no entendía qué motivos podía tener para interrogarla así; pero volvió a responderle por Kate.

—No me dejó la menor duda de que está libre.

Lord Mark la miró, aunque siguió sonriendo.

—Y, por consiguiente, ¿tampoco le dejó la menor duda de que también lo está usted? —No obstante, fue como si, nada más hablar, comprendiera que había cometido una equivocación, y Milly no habría sabido decir qué brillo en su mirada se lo dio a entender al instante. En cualquier caso él no le dio tiempo para averiguarlo; retrocedió en el acto con un leve movimiento—. Todo eso está muy bien, pero ¿por qué, mi querida amiga, se vio en la necesidad de prometérselo?

Ella dedujo que ese «querida amiga» se refería a ella y eso la desconcertó, pues podía habérselo dedicado elegantemente a la calumniada Kate. Una vez más se creyó obligada a rebatir su parte de la calumnia.

—Porque, como le he contado, nos hemos hecho muy amigas.

—¡Ah! —dijo lord Mark, que pareció dar a entender que en tal caso no hacían falta tantas formalidades.

No obstante, se dispuso a marcharse como si, en cierta medida, hubiese conseguido por fin más o menos lo que quería. Milly tuvo la sensación, mientras se despedía, de haberle dado más de lo que quería o de lo que podría justificar teóricamente cuando recobrara el dominio de sí misma. De hecho, era raro que le hubiese sacado —bajo el hechizo inquisitivo del palacio, infinitamente franco— más de lo que nadie le había podido sonsacar: ni Kate, ni la tía Maud, ni Merton Densher, ni Susan Shepherd. Era consciente de que en particular lord Mark había conseguido, en menos de un minuto, hacerle perder su presencia de ánimo, y ahora deseó que se marchase para poder recuperarla o sobrellevar mejor la pérdida en soledad. No obstante, casi al mismo tiempo, vio que se detenía ante la aparición, en el otro extremo de la sala, de uno de los gondoleros, que, con independencia de qué excursiones hubieran planeado los demás, siempre se quedaba en el palacio, por ser el más apuesto, serio y esbelto, por si Milly tenía un capricho y necesitaba sus servicios: cosa que en su libertad recluida no había sucedido todavía. El bronceado Pasquale, deslizándose con sus zapatos blancos sobre el mármol le recordó a su siempre hechizada vista no habría sabido decir muy bien qué: un plácido hindú, demasiado silencioso para sus nervios, o sencillamente un marinero descalzo en la cubierta de un barco, Pasquale sostuvo obsequioso una pequeña bandeja con una tarjeta de visita. Lord Mark —como admirándolo también— retrasó su partida mientras la leía, lo que tuvo el efecto inmediato de asestar otro golpe a su presencia de ánimo. Esta exigua entidad desapareció de tal modo que incluso para tratar con Pasquale tuvo que esforzarse en disimular su falta. No obstante, antes de hacer el esfuerzo ya le había preguntado si el caballero estaba abajo y ya la le habían informado de que había subido. Al parecer había seguido al gondolero y la esperaba en lo alto de la escalera.

—Estaré encantada de recibirle —tras lo cual añadió, dirigiéndose a su acompañante, mientras se marchaba Pasquale—: Es el señor Merton Densher.

—¡Oh! —dijo lord Mark en un tono que podría haber llegado resonando por el enorme y fresco salón hasta oídos del propio Densher como un juicio sobre su identidad ya hablada y conocida.

Libro VIII

I

Densher comprendió, de nuevo, que no le gustaba su hotel… y tanto más deprisa en cuanto que ya había tenido ocasión de llegar a la misma conclusión otras veces. El establecimiento estaba abarrotado en esa época del año de una muchedumbre políglota, operarios de todas partes del mundo, sobre todo alemanes, sobre todo norteamericanos, sobre todo ingleses, que, cuando se estimulaba el correspondiente nervio sensitivo, sonaban alto y no muy dulce a todo menos a italiano y veneciano. Sabía que el veneciano era sólo un dialecto; pero, comparado con algunos de los de la ajetreada pensión, parecía ático[40] puro. En «el extranjero» era un motivo tanto de placer como de pesar tener casi siempre la sensación de haber pasado ya por todo. Había estado tres o cuatro veces, en Venecia, en otras visitas, y había experimentado ya la agradable irritación de alejarse por el agua del concierto de notas falsas en el ordinario vestíbulo, lejos de las amables familias norteamericanas y de los obesos mozos de cuerda alemanes. En cada ocasión se las había arreglado para conseguir una habitación más apartada y no por eso más costosa, y recordaba con ternura esos rancios pero amistosos albergues, cuyas ventanas reconocería con facilidad al pasar por el canal o por el *campo*[41]. Ahora los más destartalados apenas llamaron su atención, pero al cabo de cuarenta y ocho horas empezó a pensar en un *quartiere*[42] pequeño y aislado, al otro extremo del Gran Canal, donde se había alojado un mes en otra ocasión con pompa y circunstancia y la sensación al mismo tiempo de estar iniciándose en los más prosaicos misterios venecianos. Su estado de ánimo de aquellos días volvió a embargarle una hora, y lo que aconteció en ese tiempo, para ser breves, fue que al desembarcar de un *traghetto*[43] delante de la casa reconocida, distinguió en las verdes persianas de sus ventanas viejas y nuevas, las tiras de papel blanco que se utilizan en Venecia para invitar a los nuevos inquilinos. Eso fue en su primer paseo a solas, un paseo saturado de impresiones a las que respondió con intensidad. Desde su llegada apenas había salido del palazzo Leporelli, donde un cambio del tiempo había retenido desde el segundo día a todo el grupo. El episodio había sido para él como una serie de horas en un museo, aunque no tan fatigoso; y también le había recordado a algo para lo que su agitada imaginación todavía tenía que encontrar un nombre. Tal vez estuviera buscándolo mientras daba aquel paseo —comprobó que incluso después de varios años seguía sabiendo orientarse— que concluyó cuando vio al otro lado del agua los papelitos blancos.

En una o dos horas tenía que ir a cenar al palacio, donde había almorzado temprano esa misma mañana. Luego había salido con las tres damas, la señora Lowder, la señora Stringham y Kate, y había estado a flote con ellas, bajo un aceptable hechizo veneciano, hasta que la tía Maud le dio instrucciones de dejarlas y regresar con la señorita Theale. Había dos circunstancias relacionadas con esa forma de disponer de él que no le pasaron desapercibidas: la primera que la señora de Lancaster Gate le había hablado sin disimulo, como si expresara también el deseo de sus compañeras, que no habían dicho nada pero a las que podía tomarse —sí, a Susan Shepherd, igual que a Kate— como inescrutables partícipes de su plan. Lo que apenas podía olvidar era que había hecho, delante de las otras dos, aunque tenía la impresión de que había sido especialmente delante de Kate, justo lo que le habían pedido: se había levantado sin protestar y había vuelto sobre sus pasos al palacio. Seguía teniendo presente la cuestión de si había parecido un idiota, o si la extrañeza que notó cuando la góndola se balanceó al desembarcar —sólo encontraron un embarcadero que no era de los mejores— había procurado a sus amigas suficiente diversión para intercambiar a su espalda varias sonrisas cómplices. Veinte minutos después, había encontrado a Milly Theale sola y se había quedado con ella hasta que los demás llegaron a tomar el té. Lo raro era que había sido fácil, facilísimo. Sabía que era raro sólo cuando se marchaba, porque al irse entraba en contacto con determinadas cosas que hacían que así fuese. En aquel momento, en su presencia, fue tan sencillo como pasar un rato con su hermana, y, si le hubiesen preguntado, no mucho más emocionante. Seguía viéndola como la primera vez: eso pertenecía indeleblemente al pasado. La señora Lowder, Susan Shepherd, su propia Kate, podían, cada una a su

manera, verla como una princesa, como un ángel, como una estrella, pero para él, por suerte, no tenía ninguna complicación que pudiera incomodarle: la princesa, el ángel, la estrella, quedaban leve y radiantemente ocultas tras la joven norteamericana que tan amable había sido con él en Nueva York y con quien desde luego —aunque sin que ninguno de los dos le diese demasiada importancia— estaba dispuesto a ser amable en correspondencia. Ella agradeció que hubiese ido a verla a propósito, aunque —como siempre estaba en casa— no les resultó difícil guardar las apariencias. La única nota de vehemencia que se cruzó entre ellos fue la admisión por parte de la joven de que prefería quedarse en el palacio. Milly no permitió que él lo llamase estar tranquila, pues insistió en que su palacio —con toda su historia, arte y aventura— la había sumido en un torbellino de emociones que no la había abandonado hasta al cabo de una hora. No había por tanto, entre aquellas paredes, confinamiento, sino la libertad de los siglos: y Densher reconoció de buen grado que en tal caso eran arrastrados, él y ella, por el espacio.

Kate había encontrado en la presente ocasión un momento para decirle que le recordaba a un primo inteligente que hubiera ido a visitar a una prima enferma cuyos sufrimientos le aburrían; y aunque él negó en el acto lo del «aburrimiento» reparó en que era posible que produjese esa impresión y se preguntó si Milly no habría pensado lo mismo. En cuanto aparecía Kate, salía a relucir la diferencia: enseguida sentía lo raro que era haber caído tan bajo. Era caer bajo porque suponía hacer lo que le había dicho Kate, no —como había sido el ideal de su vida— lo que él quería. Esa diferencia, por tanto, renovada, aguda, amarga, era lo que le había empujado a salir irritado del palacio y lo que le obligaría a hacer un esfuerzo para volver a cenar allí. Se dijo que tenía que poner a mal tiempo buena cara; era lo que había estado pensando, en el *traghetto*, incluso mientras, ante la posibilidad de cambiar de hotel, observaba, al otro lado del canal, su anterior alojamiento. Le había servido en el pasado, ¿le serviría en el presente? ¿Serviría para la necesidad general de la que era consciente? Esa necesidad de poner a mal tiempo buena cara era el instinto —como bien sabía— de un hombre sabedor de que si cedía en una cosa tendría que ceder en todo. Si apartaba la mano, la mano que al menos ayudaba a sostenerlo todo, el extraño tejido que le rodeaba se desharía en menos de un minuto y dejaría pasar la luz. En realidad era cuestión de temple; precisamente porque estaba nervioso podía andar recto; sin embargo, si la situación se agravaba acabaría desquiciándose. Estaba andando, en suma, por una cresta elevada, rodeada de precipicios, donde lo mejor —si lograbas hacerte a la idea de estar allí— era conservar la cabeza fría. Kate lo había subido a aquella altura, y a veces, cuando se veía dando un paso justo después de otro, percibía la agudeza de la ironía de su forma de manejarlo. No era que lo hubiese puesto en peligro: estar en verdadero peligro con ella habría tenido una cualidad muy distinta. Lo que sentía de hecho era una especie de rabia por lo que no tenía: una exasperación, un resentimiento, adquirido en realidad por la misma impaciencia de su deseo, respecto a su estado pospuesto y relegado, tan extremadamente manipulado. Ella lo hacía con suma elegancia, pero ¿qué significaba a la postre sino que él se plegaba siempre a sus designios? Su idea desde el principio, desde el momento mismo en que la conoció, había sido ser *bon prince*[44] con ella, como dicen los franceses; hacer gala del buen humor, la generosidad, el desprecio, en cuestiones de confianza, por los pequeños gastos y economías, característicos del hombre que no se asusta fácilmente. Había muchas cosas, Dios era testigo —pues era el resumen de su situación— que no podía permitirse; pero ¿qué había tenido encanto para él sino la idea de vivir generosamente, compensarlo de otro modo para, en todo caso, no leer la aventura de su existencia en una edición barata? Recordó todo lo que había sentido por ella al principio; de hecho le pareció más presente que nunca, cómo había admirado y envidiado lo que llamaba su puro talento para la vida, tan diferente del suyo, débil, oportunista y cubierto de remiendos improvisados; pero ahora le irritaba que eso fuese exactamente lo que más destacaba de ella.

Tenía que agradecer al puro talento para la vida de Kate que estuviese donde estaba y sobre todo que fuese como era. La prueba de una reacción decente por su parte contra tanta pasividad era, sin demasiada exageración, que al menos sabía, es decir, sabía cómo era y lo poco que le gustaba aceptarlo por impotencia. De momento era melancólico: eso era lo que mejor lo describía; era una parte muy considerable de la fuerza que, a medida que caía la tarde de otoño, lo mantenía en su *traghetto*, dándole vueltas a la misma cuestión. Dicha cuestión estaba relacionada, incluso allí, con su amargura contenida, su sensación casi de vergüenza; y eso que la amargura y la vergüenza eran menos pues, gracias a las condiciones que lo rodeaban, se permitía considerarla una cuestión grave. Emanaba en parte de dichas condiciones, de aquellas condiciones que Kate había creado casi con insolencia, aceptando, sin una sola punzada de remordimiento, verlo expuesto al ridículo, ridículo en tanto que complaciente. Antes de abandonar su atalaya tendría ocasión de comprobar qué poca complacencia podía haber en eso. Su cuestión, como la hemos denominado, era la interesante cuestión de si aún le quedaba fuerza de voluntad. ¿Cómo podía saberlo —ésa era la clave— sin ponerla a prueba? Había hecho bien en ser *bon prince*, y la alegría, parte del orgullo, de haber vivido

generosamente, aunque fuese en espíritu, era incluso entonces compatible con el impulso de considerar su situación; aunque contuvo un poco el aliento cuando reparó con suprema claridad en que, mientras él había hecho todo lo que Kate quería, ella no había hecho nada de lo que quería él. Así fue, en suma, como su idea del modo en que debía poner a prueba esa posibilidad siguió planteándose, en el cálido crepúsculo, que presagiaba la aproximación de la noche meridional —las «condiciones» de las que acabamos de hablar— ante el aleteo cada vez más fantasmal, a medida que disminuía la luz, de los papelitos blancos en las viejas persianas verdes. Cuando miró el reloj llevaba un cuarto de hora reflexionando en su puesto de observación; pero cuando se fue de allí había encontrado la respuesta a aquella idea tan inoportuna. Quería una prueba de su fuerza de voluntad y le estaba esperando ahí mismo, al otro lado del canal. Un barquero del pequeño muelle le había ofrecido varias veces sus servicios, pero su nerviosismo le había empujado a rechazarlos. Iría al otro lado, pero andando, muy deprisa, dando un rodeo hasta cruzar por fin por el Rialto. Resultó que la habitación estaba desocupada; su antigua *padrona* fingió reconocerlo con una radiante sonrisa, igual que los objetos vetustos y desvencijados, refinados en su desaliño, amables en su decadencia, y por su parte el reconocimiento fue tierno y veraz; así que antes de marcharse quedó en que se instalaría al día siguiente.

Por la noche en la cena se lo contó a todo el mundo… a pesar de un extraño primer impulso, que se disipó al llegar al palacio, de callárselo como un asunto puramente personal. Esa necesidad, esa conveniencia, la había dado por descontada incluso cuando comprendió de pronto, en el curso de la conversación, que el incidente contribuiría a la diversión general. Y eso fue, de hecho, lo que ocurrió, gracias a su descripción: una evocación del rococó humilde y pintoresco de un interior veneciano a la antigua. Insistió en que los inmensos salones de su anfitriona, aunque infinitamente majestuosos, no resistían la comparación con aquello; y le salió tan bien que ella le pidió que cumpliera con su deber de invitarla un día a tomar el té. Hasta ese momento no había expresado —y él fue tan consciente como los demás— el menor deseo de ir a ninguna parte, ni siquiera de hacer un esfuerzo para asistir a las festividades de la parroquia, o presenciar un atardecer otoñal, o bajar las escaleras por Ticiano o Gianbellini[45]. Densher había pensado siempre que entre Kate y él las cosas se sobreentendían sin necesidad de hablar, y que él percibía en ella, igual que ella en él, innumerables indicios del suave aliento de las conciencias que se encuentran y estimulan mutuamente. Semejante intuición se vio justificada esa noche cuando Kate aceptó sin hacer nada por demostrarlo el ofrecimiento que le hizo Milly de ir a verle. Todo encajaba tan perfectamente con lo que ella había previsto y deseado que se vio cegada y gratificada y no reparó —y eso fue lo que más sorprendió a Densher—, ni por la falsa calidad de su respuesta, ni por su tono y su mirada, en que por un instante había buscado de manera instintiva la de ella, ni tampoco en que él había respondido de manera inevitable, casi con cinismo, sólo con la intención de ganar tiempo. Este descuido de Kate le dio en el acto parte de la ventaja que estaba buscando, siempre que ella fuese tan poco honrada como él. Era consciente de que era posible que Kate hubiese comprendido, en algún profundo recoveco de su ser, la relevancia que tenía para ella aquel hecho tan trivial que él acababa de anunciar; pues, al fin y al cabo, ella era más que capaz de adivinar las cosas y al mismo tiempo ocultar sus sentimientos. No obstante, gracias a eso pudo achacarle una falta de comprensión que le permitió sentirse el más fuerte de los dos. Aunque alguna aprensión pudiera haber acariciado con sus alas a Kate respecto a sus motivos por cambiar de alojamiento, el caso era que no había sabido ver que Densher estaba haciéndole una falsa promesa a su amiga. Ella misma se lo había impuesto. Desde el principio habían tenido en perspectiva un punto concreto y particular en el que tendría que empezar a producirse esa falsedad, por llamarla por su nombre menos comprometido. Y la hora acababa de sonar con todo su hechizo.

Cualesquiera que fuesen sus motivos para volver a alquilar su antiguo alojamiento, no había sido para recibir a Milly Theale, aunque eso no alteró su expresión de feliz complacencia más que si hubiese sido —como intentaba evitar— vil y despiadado. Tan rápido de hecho era el ritmo de su tragedia interior que la fugaz visión de la imposibilidad que produjo en él la petición directa e inesperada de su anfitriona tuvo el efecto, ligeramente siniestro, de asustarlo de verdad. Le dio una medida de la intensidad, la realidad de su proyecto ahora maduro. Desde luego no le produjo ningún remordimiento, pero hizo que pareciera tan vívido como si ya lo hubiese coronado el éxito. Fue ese rubor del éxito el que hizo que su corazón latiera casi asustado. Su miedo era sólo temor a la felicidad que veía al alcance de su mano, pero era un síntoma en sí mismo. Que una visita de Milly le pareciera, en ese cálculo de lo inevitable, una total incongruencia, una idea casi detestable y, por encima de todo, algo que, por decirlo vulgarmente, echaba a perder su juego, podía identificarse con una las muchas maneras de hacer el idiota que parecía tener siempre a su disposición. Sería, no obstante, con la que de antemano se sentiría más resignado. Su proyecto maduro, respecto al cual no se permitía ni un gramo de ilusión, tomó en su imaginación posesión del lugar y así fue precisamente como lo vio: ya desempaquetado y dispuesto a albergar la inocencia y la belleza de Milly por

poco tiempo que fuese. Había cosas que ella nunca reconocería, que nunca sentiría, que no captaría en el aire; pero eso no cambiaba el hecho de que su contacto con ellas no hiciese ningún bien a nadie. A él le correspondía actuar con escrúpulos y delicadeza. Así era como veía todos los elementos de la cuestión, mientras que, sorprendentemente, Kate parecía no ver ninguno. Claro que, no obstante, ¿cuándo no había sido suya la última palabra?: Kate siempre era sublime.

Esto salió a relucir en todas las circunstancias en esos primeros días, sobre todo porque, cada vez que nuestra atribulada pareja lograba aferrarse a la feliz oportunidad de pasar media hora juntos, lo hacían condenados —aunque Densher tenía sensación de que la culpa era sólo suya— a pasar parte de ese tiempo admirándose de su suerte y considerando su extraña naturaleza. Fue lo que sucedió después incluso de que, en cierto modo, Densher tuviese ocasión de acostumbrarse; fue lo que sucedió después de que la joven —siempre dispuesta, como hemos dicho, a decir la última palabra— le hubiese concedido el beneficio de rectificar cualquier apariencia equivocada, un consuelo ya familiar para él en otras épocas. Y fue lo que continuó sucediendo después de que él consiguiera, con un poco de imaginación, como decía Kate, y gracias al modo evidente en que se desarrolló la crisis, comprender la idea de la señora Lowder que la había ocasionado. Fuese cual fuese dicha idea —y Kate afirmaba abiertamente que no podía estar más de acuerdo con ella— bastaba con ver cómo estaban saliendo las cosas para considerarla plenamente justificada. La respuesta de Densher a tan vívidos razonamientos era que por supuesto, la intervención de la tía Maud no se le había ocultado ni siquiera a él, desde el momento en que le había escrito, con su laconismo característico, que si iba a pasar quince días en Venecia podía garantizarle que no tendría motivos para arrepentirse. En realidad la tía Maud era la única capaz de hacer así esas cosas; igual que él era el único, y estaba dispuesto a admitirlo, capaz de hacer otras que todos —¿o no?— creían que estaba obligado a hacer. La admonición de la señora Lowder había sido, por supuesto, una alusión directa a lo que le había dicho en Lancaster Gate antes de marcharse, la noche que Milly no se presentó por estar indispuesta; y esa notable declaración había estado a la altura del buen natural que le atribuía. Las discusiones del joven sobre su situación —que tenía únicamente con Kate, pues nunca habló del asunto con la propia tía Maud— sufrían un poco, como es de suponer, por la sensación de que no podía descargarlo todo, como decía él en privado, sobre las espaldas de los demás. Cuando estaba a solas, se ruborizaba hasta las orejas al pensar que la señora Lowder se había limitado a ponerlo a prueba, para ver cómo era y lo que podía hacer con él. Le había bastado con silbar y él había acudido. Si había dado por supuesto su buen natural, estaba tan justificada como decía Kate. Esta intranquilidad de conciencia respecto a su maleabilidad general, fruto de pensar que la maleabilidad, dentro de unos límites, era un modo de vida como otro cualquiera, y sin duda mejor que muchos, y, en particular, respecto a la posible confusión sobre sus verdaderos motivos para ir a Venecia, era un malestar que no se disipaba del todo por el estilo, por muy encantador que fuese, de las interpretaciones poéticas de Kate. Ni siquiera la dicha y el deleite de la joven le permitían estar en paz consigo mismo cuando había algo muy distinto que le perturbaba.

A falta de paz interior, pudo considerar con interés —y por primera vez en su vida— si, en determinadas ocasiones, esa tranquilidad de espíritu era tan necesaria para ser feliz como por lo general se daba por sentado, sin que él lo hubiese dudado nunca. Claramente estaba inmerso en una aventura: él, que nunca se había considerado hecho para eso, y a quien le consolaba poder decirse a veces que debía estar a la altura. En su hotel, solo, de noche, o en los pocos paseos que daba a última hora por los pasajes oscuros y laberínticos y los *campi* vacíos sobre los que se cernían los mohosos palacios, donde se detenía asqueado por su desasosiego y donde el ruido de unos pasos en el pavimento era como el de un bailarín en una sala de banquetes vacía, en esos interludios meditaba fríamente, incluso hasta el punto de que, en ocasiones, guiado por el principio de que la locura es mejor que sea breve, pensaba que partir de inmediato no sólo era posible sino recomendable. No obstante le bastaba con cruzar el umbral del palazzo Leporelli para ver cómo los elementos componían, como decían los pintores, una imagen diferente. Empezaba a pensar que partir no sólo no reduciría sino que aumentaría significativamente su locura y que, por encima de todo, como en realidad no había «empezado» nada, pues sólo había consentido, tolerado con excesiva indulgencia y condonado lo que habían iniciado otros, no tenía por qué tratarse a sí mismo con un rigor supersticioso. Lo único que estaba claro entre todas esas complicaciones era que, sucediera lo que sucediese, uno tenía que portarse como un caballero: a todo lo cual se añadía sin duda la no tan resplandeciente verdad de que a veces se puede burlar el tedio de las complicaciones mediante el estudio de la cuestión de cómo portarse como un caballero. Esta cuestión, me apresuro a añadir, no era en último caso la mayor preocupación de Densher. Tres mujeres lo observaban al mismo tiempo, y, aunque esa situación no podía ser la ideal, desde el punto de vista de la comodidad, se regía, gracias a Dios, por una ley factible e inmediata. La ley era no responder con grosería a las amabilidades. No había recorrido todo el camino desde Inglaterra para ser

grosero. No había pensado qué podrían depararle esos quince días en Venecia con Kate, por muy plagados de obstáculos que estuvieran, para portarse como un grosero. No había tratado a la señora Lowder como si al obedecer a su proposición la hubiese entendido… tampoco eso lo había hecho para luego ser un grosero. Y lo que menos había preparado para semejante anticlímax era un inminente e inevitable sometimiento —¡como un caballero, por supuesto!— a la inesperada impresión, causada por la pobre, pálida y exquisita Milly, dueña de un viejo y majestuoso palacio y pródiga, gracias a todas esas condiciones, en la hospitalidad más irresistible que jamás había conocido.

Tal espectáculo tenía para él una elocuencia, una autoridad, una felicidad —apenas sabía cómo llamarlo — por las que se repetía que no tenía conciencia de haberse esforzado. La hospitalidad de Milly, su franqueza, su dulzura, su tristeza, su luminosidad, su desconcertante poesía, como la denominaba en ocasiones, ayudadas por la belleza del entorno y por la idea al mismo tiempo de que ese elemento obtenía de ella, en cierta medida, en efecto y armonía, tanto como le prestaba; toda su actitud tenía, para su imaginación, significados que pendían en torno a ella, esperando, cerniéndose, abatiéndose y volviendo a alejarse, como vagos y leves fragmentos, sonidos fantasmales, de una música triste y pasada de moda. ¡Menos mal, pensaba a veces, que no podía acusar a Kate y a la señora Lowder —pues ningún caballero lo habría hecho— de, en fin, haberle enredado sin previo aviso! Ya habían pasado cinco días sin que él hubiera osado hacer ni siquiera a Kate la menor alusión a lo que tendría que haber sabido y a lo que en particular le había confundido. Sin duda, lo cierto era que, puestos a nombrar y tratar libremente las cosas, estaban viviendo, los cinco, en un ambiente en el que podía fácilmente producirse el desagradable efecto de un exabrupto. Volvía con su amiga, en cada ocasión, al bendito milagro de su renovada proximidad, que tenía una doble virtud en ese aire propicio. Lo respiraba como si apenas pudiera creerlo; sin embargo, había pasado el tiempo sin que, a pesar de ese privilegio, le hubiese hecho el menor comentario sobre el estilo y la majestuosidad de Milly, como habría sido lógico por la impresión que le había causado. Para él detrás de todo estaba el constante recuerdo, que había llegado a convertirse en un hábito, de que había sido el primero en conocerla. En eso era en lo que habían insistido todos, en su ausencia, aquel día en casa de la señora Lowder; y eso en especial era lo que le había hecho sentir su influencia cuando volvió a visitarla. Esta influencia había estado por todas partes, había estado con ellos en el alto y ruidoso carruaje cuando lo llevó a dar un paseo, cubriéndolos como una alfombra de seda suavísima. Había obrado como una clara conexión con algo alojado en el pasado, algo que era ya suyo. Densher recordó más de una vez que, incluso entonces, se había dicho en algún momento del paseo que no estaba allí paseándose por voluntad de Kate, sino por la de Milly, y sólo por Milly, y por él y la suya, sin duda alguna… además de por los pequeños acontecimientos, cualquiera que fuese su importancia, de su estancia en Nueva York.

II

Hubo por fin, con todo lo que eso supuso, una ocasión en que consiguió arrancarle a Kate, respecto a lo que ella llamaba su eterna cantinela, una respuesta que luego le asombraría por su capacidad de precipitar los acontecimientos. Su eterna cantinela era el modo en que volvía a insistir en el enigma de lo que creía conseguir la señora Lowder, y que tan difícil de reconciliar era con las oportunidades que les daba para verse. Impaciente, la joven las negaba y le preguntó, con una fina ironía que le golpeó de lleno, si de verdad le parecían tan maravillosas. Él la miró directamente a los ojos justo después de que pronunciara estas palabras; era lo menos que podía hacer por haberle hecho ruborizar. Entonces, por alguna razón, desapareció toda brusquedad de la voz de Kate, que se volvió dulce y sincera.

—«Encuentros», mi vida —repitió en tono expresivo—, ¿tan fructíferos te parecen, al fin y al cabo, nuestros encuentros?

—Al contrario: son una dieta estricta. Lo único que digo, y no he querido decir otra cosa desde el día en que llegué, es que al menos sacamos más de ellos que la tía Maud.

—¡Ah! —replicó Kate—, tú no entiendes lo que saca la tía Maud.

—Exacto… y eso es lo que me tiene fascinado. No deja ni un resquicio; es prodigiosa. ¡Se lo toma todo con una naturalidad que…!

—Se toma con naturalidad que yo me dedique a hacer reflexiones sobre ti. A ella siempre le parece —prosiguió Kate— que lo que ha decidido que es posible lo es, que lo que había considerado probable está ocurriendo. Su misma esencia, como habrás comprobado ya por ti mismo, es que cuando concibe una idea, en fin, siempre la consigue, aterroriza con ella a cualquier otra idea contraria y también a quienes se atrevan a defenderla. A menudo he pensado que el secreto de su éxito —Kate continuó estudiando el fenómeno— es ese espíritu suyo que la lleva a desafiar a su idea a no ser la mejor. Una ha visto tantas veces que, a pesar de todo, su idea termina siendo la buena…

Densher, mientras la escuchaba, respondió con una amplia sonrisa.

—¡Ay, mi niña!, si eres capaz de explicarlo, está claro que no necesito entenderlo. Sólo estoy condenado a eso —explicó a su vez— cuando es incomprensible. —Hizo una pausa y prosiguió—: ¿Es que cree que nos aterroriza a nosotros? —Luego, como Kate se limitó a observar la plaza sin decir palabra, añadió—: ¿De verdad cree algo tan absurdo como que tus sentimientos por mí han cambiado? —Sabía que la estaba sondeando profundamente… algo se lo dio a entender, pero le pareció sólo una razón más para hacerlo—. ¿Ha conseguido convencerse de que no te gusto?

A lo cual, Kate respondió de pronto:

—¡Para ti sería fácil convencerla!

Él vaciló.

—¿Diciéndoselo?

—No —respondió Kate como si le hiciera gracia su ingenuidad—; no te pido eso.

—¡Claro, cariño! —se rio Densher—, tú nunca pides nada…

Había tanta ironía en sus palabras que notó cómo Kate se resistía al impulso de responder.

—Todo lo que te he pedido está totalmente justificado —dijo sin inmutarse—. Y no parece que te vaya tan mal. —Sus ojos volvieron a encontrarse íntimamente y eso la obligó a continuar—. No das la impresión de ser muy desdichado.

—¿Ah, no? —respondió él con firmeza.

—El caso es que no se te nota… y a la tía Maud le basta con eso. Eres maravilloso, encantador —dijo Kate— y, si de verdad quieres saber si creo que lo conseguirás, te aseguro que sí. —Tras lo cual, con una brusca transición, como dando el asunto por zanjado, le preguntó la hora.

—¡Oh!, son sólo las doce y diez —había mirado su reloj—. Apenas han pasado trece minutos; todavía

hay tiempo.

—Pues vamos. Vayamos a buscarlas.

Desde donde se hallaban, Densher observó la extensión de la plaza.

—Todavía están en la tienda. Aún tenemos una media hora.

—¡Ya lo ves, entonces ya lo ves! —dijo Kate.

Este coloquio se había desarrollado en mitad de la Piazza San Marco, siempre propicia la conversación, como un enorme salón social de suelo liso y techo azul; o más bien, para ser exactos, no en mitad de la plaza, sino en el lugar donde nuestra pareja se había detenido por un común impulso al salir de la enorme iglesia parecida a una mezquita. Se alzaba ahora con sus cúpulas y pináculos un poco por detrás, y tenían delante el inmenso espacio vacío, rodeado por los soportales, a los que a esa hora estaba confinado casi todo el tráfico y movimiento. Venecia estaba desayunando, la Venecia del visitante y el posible conocido, y, dejando aparte las bandadas de molestas palomas que picoteaban las migajas de los eternos banquetes, tenían la vista despejada y podían ver que sus acompañantes no habían salido aún, y que no era probable que salieran hasta pasado un rato, de la tienda de encajes, en una de las *loggie*, donde, poco antes, las habían dejado para disfrutar de la ocasión —la astuta expresión era de Densher— de echar un vistazo al interior de San Marcos. La mañana les había brindado esa oportunidad; sin embargo, la alusión que acababa de hacerle a Kate no había sido una exageración de sus oportunidades en general. Lo peor que podía decirse de sus oportunidades en general era que en esencia acontecían en presencia de todos; y en aquel caso todos eran, en un mundo tan poblado, Susan Shepherd, la tía Maud y Milly. Pero la prueba de que, incluso en su presencia, la oportunidad podía ser especial se la dio precisamente esa compatibilidad entre su conveniencia y la breve demora de sus acompañantes. Habían entendido que no quisieran entrar en la tienda; era lo menos que podían hacer. En realidad, lo que más les había ayudado esa mañana era el hecho de que al presentarse, como siempre decía él, en palacio, Milly no había podido, como en anteriores ocasiones, recibirle. Hasta entonces, el uso y la costumbre habían estado claramente establecidos: a su llegada, día tras día —habían transcurrido convenientemente ocho días—, sus amigos, los de Milly y los suyos, se dispersaban no menos convenientemente y lo dejaban a solas con ella hasta la hora del almuerzo. Así funcionaba a la perfección el plan en el que se había visto, como decía él, envuelto; por lo que sin duda a Kate no le faltaba razón para jactarse de su éxito. La señora Lowder —no podía evitar pensarlo mientras estaba allí— tendría la impresión, tal como deseaba, de que no estaba lo bastante interesado por Kate como para que fuese alarmante. Le había fallado a su joven anfitriona esas mañanas tan poco como ella a él; y sólo ese día ella no se había sentido lo bastante bien para recibirle.

Causó un efecto general; se notó en el modo en que, reunidos en el salón principal, fresco, iluminado y lleno de flores, como siempre, para cuando ella bajase, se miraron —todos ellos— unos a otros. Fue morboso —morboso, con toda probabilidad para todos y cada uno de ellos— que ninguno expresara su pesar. A nuestro joven le resultó sobre todo extraño que, si de verdad la pobre Milly estaba tan indispuesta, los invitados sólo pudieran permitirse ese silencio solemne, aprensivo y elocuente. Un silencio, además, que continuó después de que los cuatro ocuparan su sitio en la góndola. Milly había mandado decirles que contaba con que salieran a divertirse, y eso había causado otra mirada elocuente, como si supieran, todos y cada uno de ellos, lo que significaba ese mensaje respecto a la necesidad de procurarle a Densher otra distracción. No quería estropearles la mañana, y, con mucho tacto, se había encargado de buscar un remedio. La señora Stringham la había ayudado, la señora Stringham, que, puestos a eso, conocía a su amiga mejor que nadie. Tanto que sabía que estaba cumpliendo unas condiciones relativamente oscuras y más bien horribles para los demás al no considerar necesario quedarse en casa. Había corregido ese elemento de superficialidad que caracterizaba, para todos, la ocasión; y se había inventado una preferencia para la señora Lowder y para sí misma: había recordado el acariciado sueño de visitar la tienda de encajes que hasta entonces siempre se había visto impedido por uno u otro accidente, y resultó también que, el día anterior, Kate había aludido al papel del destino en su propio fracaso para visitar con detalle el interior de San Marcos. La impresión que tenía Densher de la intervención deliberada de Susan Shepherd ocupaba por sí misma un rincón de su cerebro; lo que se había iniciado en Lancaster Gate había acabado transformándose en un sentimiento que había llegado a cobrar forma; su modo de actuar, inefablemente discreto, redundaba siempre, en cualquier caso, de manera sutil, cuando no superficial, en interés de Densher. No estaban realmente confabulados como un dúo o un «equipo»; había demasiadas personas, al menos tres, y demasiadas cosas entre ellos; pero entretanto se estaba urdiendo algo que serviría para unirlos aún más. Densher apenas sabía qué: probablemente nada, sólo que en algún momento, cuando le fuese más útil, descubriría que ella siempre le había entendido. Incluso tuvo el presentimiento de que llegaría a producirse la ocasión en la que se enfrentaría a la falta de comprensión de todos y únicamente sobreviviría

la de esta pequeña y profunda mujer.

Éste era hoy, con toda su novedad, el ambiente moral, como podríamos decir, que pendía sobre nuestros jóvenes amigos; éstos eran los pequeños accidentes y las fuerzas silenciosas a los que debían la ventaja de la que hemos visto que, en cierto modo, estaban disfrutando. De hecho, parecía estar aumentando para ellos cuando reemprendieron la marcha; la espléndida plaza, que notoriamente había presenciado, en todos sus años, más la alegría de vivir que ningún otro lugar parecido de Europa, les proporcionaba, al impedir que nadie pudiera oírles, seguridad y soledad. Era como si, después de tomar posesión de la plaza, pudieran decir lo que quisieran; y también como si, a raíz de eso, cada uno de ellos sintiera cierta aprensión de lo que pudiera decir el otro. Sobre todo era además como si esas mismas palabras pronunciadas por sus labios en el aire histórico y brillante, donde lo único que se oía era el aleteo de las palomas, inspirase temor en sus corazones. Tal vez el modo en que Densher interrumpió el silencio que se había hecho después de que hablara Kate dejase entrever algo de eso.

—¿Qué has querido insinuar que puedo hacer para convencer a la señora Lowder? Puedes decir que soy idiota, si quieres, pero, desde el momento en que no puedo mentirle, no veo qué otra cosa puedo hacer.

Bueno, pues ella se lo aclararía.

—Puedes decirle algo sincero y bonito sobre Milly… a quien sinceramente le tienes mucho afecto. Eso no sería mentir y, viniendo de ti, no dejaría de causar impresión. Apenas hablas de ella. —Y Kate puso ante él fruto de sus observaciones—. En realidad no hablas nunca de ella.

—Y ¿te lo ha dicho la tía Maud? —preguntó Densher. Luego, como la única respuesta de la joven fue quedarse meditabunda, exclamó—: ¡Debéis tener unas conversaciones de lo más extraordinario!

Sí, Kate había meditado.

—Tenemos conversaciones extraordinarias.

Los ojos de Densher, cuando se miraron, dejaron bien claro que le gustaría saber más de ellas; pero algo en los de Kate descartó esa posibilidad. Al cabo de un instante, él le preguntó otra cosa que llevaba una semana rondándole por la cabeza, pues hasta el momento no había encontrado ninguna ocasión tan buena para planteársela.

—¿Sabes entonces, ya que tenéis esas conversaciones tan maravillosas, qué opina tu tía de la repentina visita de lord Mark, el otro día, y de que pasara aquí, según tengo entendido, sólo las dos o tres horas indispensables para ver a nuestra amiga, y sin embargo no aprovechase, pues partió en tren esa misma noche, para ver a nadie más? ¿Qué opina de que no esperase a verte a ti, o a ella… con todo lo que le debe?

—¡Oh, por supuesto que lo entiende! —dijo Kate—. Vino a pedirle la mano a Milly… sólo eso. Y, como Milly lo rechazó, no tenía nada que hacer aquí. En tales condiciones no podía ir a visitarnos.

Pareció sorprenderse de que Densher no entendiera esa falta de tacto por parte de semejante intrigante. Pero Densher estaba abstraído en otros pensamientos.

—¿Insinúas que, cuando llegué y él estaba a punto de salir, era eso lo que acababa de ocurrir?

—¿No te diste cuenta, cariño? —preguntó Kate.

—¿Qué especie de torpe veleta está hecho? —exclamó perplejo el joven.

—¡Oh, no lo menosprecies! —exclamó Kate con una sonrisa—. ¿Vas a decirme que Milly no te lo contó?

—¿Que se ha portado como un auténtico imbécil?

Kate siguió sonriendo.

—Estás enamorado de ella, ¿sabes?

Él volvió a dedicarle una larga mirada.

—¿Por qué deduces eso de mi opinión de lord Mark, si ella le ha rechazado? De todos modos, no me siento obligado a pensar bien de él en vista de cómo ha tratado a las otras personas que he dicho y, por lo que me cuentas, no entiendo por qué lo hace la señora Lowder.

—No lo hace… pero le da igual —explicó Kate—. Conoces perfectamente las condiciones en las que convive en Londres mucha gente que se supone que es feliz. No tiene ninguna obligación con nosotros… Estaba probando suerte. ¿Es que un hombre insatisfecho —preguntó— no puede probar suerte?

—Y ¿regresar después, esperando ser bien recibido, con la víctima de su inconstancia?

Kate consintió, para facilitar la discusión, que la considerase una víctima.

—¡Oh!, también ha probado suerte conmigo, así que no pasa nada.

—¿Porque también tú le has rechazado?

Ella vaciló un instante en el que Densher habría podido preguntarse si la pura verdad histórica no iba a verse un tanto comprometida. Sin embargo, respondió con acierto.

—No he dejado que las cosas llegaran tan lejos. Lo he desalentado demasiado. La tía Maud —prosiguió, más lúcida que nunca— considera, sin duda, que tiene cierto compromiso conmigo, que se habría roto si

Milly le hubiese aceptado. En vista de cómo han ido las cosas, no tiene importancia.

Densher soltó una carcajada.

—Haber fracasado no es mérito suyo.

—Cariño, su mérito sigue siendo que es lord Mark. Eso es justo lo que era, y lo que sabía que era. No me corresponde a mí criticarlo después de cómo le he tratado.

—¡Oh! —exclamó impaciente Densher—, le has tratado de maravilla.

—Me alegro —dijo ella con una sonrisa— de que todavía sientas celos. —Pero antes de que él pudiera responder, añadió algo más—: No entiendo por qué te extraña que la actitud de Milly complazca tanto a la tía Maud. ¿Qué otra cosa ve sino que Milly considera que su relación contigo es demasiado preciosa para estropearla? Eso le da a entender que tú también estás hasta cierto punto de acuerdo y, en consecuencia, deduce que cuanto más tiempo pases con Milly menos pasarás conmigo.

Había momentos —sabemos que habían sido muchos desde el principio— en los que Densher percibía, con una extraña mezcla de sentimientos, la maestría con en que Kate sabía plantear las cosas. Había algo en ella que lo empujaba a la convicción y la reacción. Y este efecto, comoquiera que se llame, se dejó traslucir en su voz.

—¡Oh, si supiera por un instante lo que he hecho por ti…!

Sus palabras eran todo menos equívocas, pero Kate no vaciló.

—Por suerte para nosotros, podemos deducir que no lo imagina. Nuestro éxito en eso ha sido total.

—Bueno —respondió él enseguida—, acepto lo que me dices, y supongo que, para ser consecuente —y seguir donde estoy—, tendría que estarte agradecido. Lo que pasa es que tengo la impresión de que me pides que lo haga todo yo. Que es lo que esperas de mí. Nunca es lo que podría esperar yo de ti. Hay tantas cosas que me niegas.

Ella pareció extrañada.

—Y dime, te lo ruego, ¿qué es lo que te…?

—Te doy pruebas —respondió Densher—. Tú, en cambio, no me das ninguna.

—Y ¿a qué llamas pruebas? —se aventuró a preguntar Kate al cabo de un momento.

—A que hagas algo por mí.

Ella se quedó pensando sorprendida.

—¿Acaso no estoy haciendo esto por ti? ¿Llamas nada a esto?

—Nada en absoluto.

—¡Ay, cariño, lo arriesgo todo!

Habían seguido andando despacio, pero él se paró en seco.

—¡Pensaba que decías que, con tu tía tan engañada, no arriesgabas nada!

Era la primera vez que la veía desconcertada desde que se le ocurrió su maravillosa idea. Enseguida vio que a Kate no le gustaba que la desconcertasen o que la vieran así, pues respondió con una impaciencia que dejó bien claro que se había molestado; lo cual produjo en él una aguda punzada de indulgencia.

—Y ¿qué es lo que quieres que arriesgue?

Su disposición a enfrentarse al peligro le conmovió, pero sólo sirvió, como él habría dicho, para hacer que se sintiera peor.

—Lo que quiero es sentirme querido. ¿Cómo puedo saber que lo soy? —¡Oh!, ella le entendió, por más que se esforzara en disimularlo, y eso le tranquilizó un poco. Densher siempre sentía intensamente la vida a su lado, tanto como en el momento en que intercambiaron aquellos indicios de vida en la oscuridad de Londres hacía dos inviernos. Nunca la había tenido por ingenua, ignorante, débil; y si le pedía una fe más intensa era porque sabía que lo entendería y que sabría dársela—. Con ayuda —dijo— tal vez pueda continuar, pero sin ella no.

Kate apartó la mirada y le dejó ver hasta qué punto le entendía.

—Tendríamos que estar allí… cuando salgan, digo.

—No saldrán… aún no. Y me da igual si salen. —Y enseguida añadió, temiendo que Kate pudiera tildar de egoístas sus palabras—: ¿Por qué no renunciamos a todo y afrontamos sin más las consecuencias? —exclamó con total sinceridad—. ¡Dios, si me aceptaras!

Kate volvió a mirarlo, y Densher supo que, a fin de cuentas, en algún profundo rincón de su ser, ella consideraba esa rebelión más dulce que amarga. Su efecto sobre su espíritu y sus sentidos la dominó visiblemente por un instante.

—Hemos llegado demasiado lejos —se obligó a responder a pesar de todo—. ¿Es que quieres matarla?

Él titubeó sin demasiada sinceridad.

—¿A la tía Maud?

—Sabes muy bien a quién digo. Hemos contado demasiadas mentiras.

¡Ay!, fue oírla y levantar la cabeza.

—¡Yo, cariño, no he contado ninguna!

Lo dijo con tanta brusquedad que se aplacó un poco, aunque, claro, también tuvo que soportar la mirada que ella le dirigió.

—Muchas gracias.

Su expresión, no obstante, no logró contener las palabras que habían brotado ya de los labios de Densher.

—Antes que prestarme a la menor apariencia de mentira, prefiero marcharme esta misma noche.

—Pues ya puedes ir yéndote —respondió Kate Croy.

Densher comprendió poco después, en cuanto reanudaron la marcha, que lo que se respiraba, de manera más bien desconcertante en el ambiente, no era la violencia, sino la fría calma con que Kate había pronunciado esas palabras. Siguieron andando, y por un minuto fue como si su diferencia se hubiese convertido de pronto en una verdadera separación, como si su partida estuviese ya decidida. Luego, de modo incoherente y aún más repentino, y además arriesgado, pues ahora podían verles desde los soportales, le pasó la mano por debajo del brazo con una fuerza que les hizo volver a detenerse.

—Mentiré cuanto quieras, lo que haga falta para poner tu idea en práctica, si vienes conmigo.

—¿Contigo?

—Conmigo.

—¿Cómo? ¿Adónde?

Aunque habló en voz baja, a él le sorprendió su ecuanimidad.

—A mi habitación: es perfectamente posible, y la alquilé pensando en ti, como sin duda has debido imaginar. Podemos arreglarlo si tenemos un poco de valor. La gente en nuestra situación siempre se las arregla. —Ella le escuchó como si quisiera informarse mejor y él se sintió alentado, ya que era cuestión de ir paso a paso, al ver que ella no fingía escandalizarse. De hecho no había esperado de ella semejante vulgaridad, pero que no lo hiciera sirvió para añadir la emoción de un motivo más intenso a sus posibilidades. Para conocerla de verdad tenía que verla ahora, incapaz de ocultarse, a la luz del día y de su admirable e implacable propósito. Que le estuviera escuchando le ayudó a entenderse a sí mismo como nunca. Comparando las dos ideas, la suya era ya, desde el principio, hermosa—. Necesito estar seguro de que no estoy portándome como un idiota. Es lo único que puedo decir, pero tienes que entenderme. Contigo, puedo hacerlo: llegaré hasta donde me digas o hasta donde tú estés dispuesta a llegar. Sin ti… ¡al diablo! Tengo que estar seguro.

Kate le escuchaba con tanta atención que siguió atenta cuando dejó de hablar. Él continuó tirándole del brazo y, aunque habían vuelto a detenerse, su conversación —para los demás, en la distancia— podría haber sido en aquel lugar incomparable, la de un turista admirado con una acompañante no tan impresionada como él. Al cogerla del brazo, la había obligado a volverse, y estaban otra vez mirando San Marcos; Densher la recorrió con la mirada, mientras Kate daba vueltas a su sombrilla. No obstante, ella hizo un movimiento que volvió a dejarlos mirando hacia los soportales. Sólo entonces habló.

—Por favor, quítame la mano del brazo.

Él lo comprendió enseguida: a la sombra de la galería, había visto a los demás salir de la tienda. Así que fueron a su encuentro como si tal cosa. Los habían visto y los esperaron encantados al pie de uno de los soportales. Ellos —pensó que pensaría Kate— también parecían dispuestos, pacientes y serviciales. Por su parte —y siempre según el criterio de Kate— ellos dos no parecían más que los retoños de una era supercivilizada esforzándose por salir de una situación embarazosa. No obstante, no se apresuraron porque eso habría llamado la atención; así que Densher tuvo tiempo de sentir lo que sentía. Sentía, con suma claridad —y así fue como se enfrentó a la señora Lowder— que ya había tomado posesión de lo que quería. Habría más… muchas cosas; aún no había conseguido todo lo que quería de su compañera. Pero lo que tenía era real: el hecho de que ella no hubiese respondido a su lucidez con la horrible sombra de un vulgar reproche. Eso le había inspirado tanto temor que haberse librado le parecía una bendición. El peligro había cesado, había quedado atrás en la enorme plaza soleada. De momento, ella estaba a la altura de lo que quería.

III

Lo estuvo, como pudo comprobar, cuando esa noche le planteó, con renovados motivos, la otra pregunta que había estado a punto de hacerle por la mañana y que la preocupación había impedido que aflorase a su conciencia. La oportunidad volvió a presentarse cuando al llegar al palacio, como de costumbre, al caer el día, supo por la señora Stringham que Milly tampoco podría acompañarlos en la cena, aunque con toda probabilidad bajaría después. Había encontrado a Susan Shepherd sola en el enorme salón, donde muchas más velas de las acostumbradas, ya de por sí muy abundantes —su amiga se volvía cada día más espléndida; todos lo notaban y le hacían bromas—, iluminaban el misterio de su gran estilo. Pasó así cinco minutos con la buena señora antes de que apareciesen Kate y la señora Lowder: unos minutos que no sólo iluminaron las velas de Milly.

—¿Puede bajar…? ¿Le conviene, si de verdad no se encuentra bien?

Lo había preguntado con la sorpresa que —por escasos que fuesen— le causaban siempre los indicios de la realidad interior de la joven. Había, por supuesto, una cuestión de salud: lo notaba en el aire, en el suelo que pisaba, en la comida que comía, en los ruidos que oía, estaba por todas partes, pero como un ruego a su delicadeza, a la discreción más elemental de los demás, para que no hiciesen alusión al asunto. Apenas habían hecho ninguna, esa mañana, a propósito de la explicación dada a su ausencia, o a que no hubiesen dado ninguna, lo cual como sabemos era monstruoso y raro; y ese rato que pasó con la señora Stringham le ofreció la primera oportunidad de abrir los ojos. Los había tenido cerrados de buen grado, y tanto más en cuanto que cerrarlos desempeñaba una función útil para su espíritu. ¿Qué prueba mejor de la rectitud de su conducta que negarse sinceramente a conocer las circunstancias de la vida de Milly? Tal vez fuese triste para ella y tal vez incluso ridículo para él; pero no había sentido ni la curiosidad que habría tenido por un amigo cualquiera. En algún momento podría haberse obligado a intentarlo para demostrar un mínimo decoro; pero incluso eso le pareció imposible. ¿En qué consistía entonces la duplicidad? Al menos estaba seguro de sus sentimientos, pues había quedado claro que no los tenía. Estaban todos, sin excepción, reservados para Kate. Todo lo que hacía era por Kate y no se desviaría ni un milímetro por su amiga. Por eso no le interesaba, porque si le hubiese interesado, se habría preocupado y habría querido saber. Si hubiese querido saber, no habría sido puramente pasivo, y su pura pasividad era la que garantizaba su dignidad y su honor. En cualquier caso, permítasenos añadir que, por suerte, la dignidad y el honor no fueron quienes tuvieron esa noche su pequeña charla con Susan Shepherd. Fue como si ella quisiera darle un leve indicio y él lo aceptara. No sólo le había permitido abrir los ojos sino que le había invitado a abrirlos.

—Me alegro mucho de que esté aquí.

No era una respuesta a su pregunta, pero tendría que contentarse por el momento. Lo demás llegaría después.

Él le dedicó una sonrisa y enseguida se sintió en comunión con ella, hablando su mismo lenguaje.

—Es una vivencia maravillosa.

—Bueno —y su rostro pareció iluminarse—, es lo único que quiero que sienta usted. Si no me asustara —añadió— le contaría muchas cosas.

—Y ¿se puede saber qué es lo que le asusta? —preguntó animándola.

—Otras cosas que podría echar a perder. Además, no sé, es como si no tuviese ocasión. Siempre está usted con ella.

Densher encontró un extraño apoyo en el modo en que se le congeló la sonrisa; y tanto más en cuanto que esas palabras eran una descripción exacta de su conducta. Era raro haber llegado a eso, pero siempre estaba con ella.

—¡Ah! —respondió pese a todo—, ahora no estoy con ella.

—No… y me alegro, porque así podemos hablar. Se encuentra mucho mejor.

—¿Mejor? ¿Es que ha estado peor?

La señora Stringham hizo una pausa.

—Ha estado maravillosa, sí, señor. Es maravillosa. Pero también es cierto que se encuentra mejor.

—¡Bueno, si de verdad está mejor…! —se contuvo, pues quería comportarse con naturalidad y sobre todo no comprometerse hasta la mistificación—. La echaremos aún más de menos en la cena.

Sin embargo, Susan Shepherd tenía preparada su respuesta.

—Sólo se está reservando. Ya lo verá. No echarán nada de menos. Va a celebrar una pequeña fiesta.

—Ahora entiendo la razón de toda esta grandeza centuplicada.

—Es precioso, ¿verdad? Me encanta. Por primera vez tiene un alojamiento digno de ella; y disfruta mucho… sacando a relucir la gloria de la casa, digo. Es lo más parecido que he visto a un cuadro de Veronese… Yo soy el inevitable enano, el negrito al que se pone en primer plano en un rincón para realzar el efecto. Si tuviese un halcón, un perro o algo parecido, haría aún más honor a la escena. La vieja ama de llaves, la mujer que cuida de este sitio, tiene una enorme cacatúa roja que podría tomar prestada para ponérmela en el hombro por la noche. —La señora Stringham le dio esas explicaciones y otras muchas, aunque no todas contribuyeron a que él se sintiera incluido en el cuadro: ¿cuál sería su papel, teniendo en cuenta que carecía de estilo, en una composición en la que todo lo tenía?—. No obstante, las pocas personas a las que ha invitado no estarán en la cena: vendrán después desde sus hoteles; y *sir* Luke Strett y su sobrina, los más importantes, deben haber llegado de Londres hace una o dos horas. Ha querido organizar algo por él, justo a su llegada. Tendremos ocasión de volver a verle, porque le tiene mucho aprecio; y me alegra mucho, y a ella también, que vaya a conocerle usted. —La buena mujer hablaba en tono apremiante, casi forzado—. Y ¡mi mayor esperanza es que…!

Pero su esperanza se perdió en la inmensa luz de su alegría.

Él se quedó mirándola y le pareció adivinar que le estaba dando a entender más de lo que decía.

—¿Cuál es su mayor esperanza?

—Pues que se quede usted.

—¿Quiere decir después de cenar? —Parecía estar insinuándole tantas cosas que apenas sabía dónde empezaba y dónde acababa.

—¡Oh, eso!, claro. Además, vamos a tener música: canciones e instrumentos preciosos, y no declamaciones de Tasso[46] como dicen las guías de viajes. Ella lo ha organizado todo, o al menos yo. Es decir, en realidad ha sido Eugenio. Además, usted forma parte del cuadro.

—¡Oh… yo! —exclamó Densher casi con la solemnidad de una queja sincera.

—Será usted el joven magnífico que supera a todos los demás y alza la cabeza y la copa[47]. Nuestra esperanza —prosiguió la señora Stringham— es que nos sea usted fiel… que no haya venido sólo por unos días absurdos e insignificantes.

Densher notó que, al oír estas palabras, sus realidades más íntimas y mezquinas despertaban incómodas del reposo que, en su inquietud, había logrado en mayor o menor grado inducirles. ¡Qué manera de hablar con los trabajadores sencillos y cohibidos, que sacrificaban su tiempo y la oportunidad de ganarse el pan modestamente, tenían esas damas educadas que viajaban por placer y vivían en cuadros de Veronese! ¡La de cosas que daban por sentadas y qué triste era tener que explicárselo! No podía explicarles que había intentado trabajar, que en parte por eso había cambiado de hotel, y sólo para verse, por primera vez en su vida, afligido y estéril; porque eso les habría dado una falsa explicación de la causa de su desasosiego, si no de la intensidad de éste. Serviría, tal vez indirecta, pero infaliblemente, para aumentar la carga de esa especie de actuación que esperaban de él y que los momentos pasados con la señora Stringham habían convertido en un peso cada vez mayor sobre su corazón. Se había expuesto a que esperasen de él dicha actuación; el mal estaba hecho y de nada servía hablar; una y otra vez se notaba aliento frío en el aire. Ahí estaba. Y en el mejor de los casos sólo acertaba a titubear.

—Me temo que no entiende que tengo cosas muy aburridas que tener en cuenta. Molestias, obligaciones en casa. La presión y la tensión de Londres.

Pero ella lo entendió a la perfección; se mostró a la altura de la presión y de la tensión y demostró que habían sido su elemento.

—¿Oh, la tarea y el sustento cotidianos, el premio o la recompensa dorados? Nadie sabe mejor que yo cómo nos acosan mientras huyen, bellos y engañosos, los días. ¿No es a eso precisamente a lo que he renunciado? He renunciado a todo para seguirla. Ojalá pudiera sentirse usted como yo. ¿No podría —preguntó— escribir sobre Venecia?

Por un instante, casi le habría gustado poder sentirse como ella; y le sonrió con amabilidad.

—¿Escribe usted sobre Venecia?

—No; pero lo haría… si no hubiese renunciado a todo. Ella es mi princesa, ¿entiende?, y a la princesa de una…

—¿Se le sacrifica todo?

—¡Exacto, ya lo ve!

Tuvo la impresión de que ningún hombre había estado en tantos sitios a la vez como él.

—Entiendo que sea su princesa. Pero comprenda que no es la mía.

Pensó que, honradamente, podía arriesgarse a hacer este comentario, pues tenía la certeza moral de que ella no se lo diría a nadie y menos que a nadie a la señora Lowder, que habría encontrado en ello turbadoras implicaciones. Eso era en parte lo que le gustaba de la buena señora, que no contaba las cosas y que le daba a entender tímidamente que quería que lo supiese. Eso en sí mismo parecía sugerir la posibilidad de una relación flexible y ventajosa para él que no le comprometería más de lo que veía. Y, al volver a darse cuenta, comprendió lo raro que era todo. Al parecer, Susan Shepherd quería lo mismo que Kate, sólo que, por lo visto, de manera muy distinta y por motivos muy diferentes, aunque no por eso menos profundos. Y a su vez la señora Lowder quería, por una extraña evolución de su exuberancia, justo lo mismo que las otras dos; y él estaba en medio. Estas percepciones le dieron ocasión, en fin, de preguntarse si no sería mejor consentir generosamente en ser el asno que querían todas. Intentar no serlo y seguir implicado era la más asnal de las dos posibilidades. Se alegró de que no hubiese testigos masculinos: era un círculo de enaguas, no le habría gustado que le viese un hombre. Por un instante, pensó en *sir* Luke Strett, el maestro del bisturí de quien Kate le había contado que estaba tratando a Milly, y cuya reaparición en ese lugar tan lejano acababan de anunciarle. Pensaba que los grandes cirujanos londinenses —si es que era cirujano— eran muy incisivos, así que tal vez no pudiera escapar del todo a la irónica atención de los de su propio sexo. Lo más que podría hacer sería no darle importancia; si lo intentaba, podría engañarle. No obstante, eso le hizo pensar también en lord Mark. Lord Mark le había sorprendido dos veces en esa situación absurda, así que ya eran dos hombres. Pero, en comparación, era fácil no prestar importancia a lord Mark.

Su amiga le había respondido ya en un tono que confirmó su discreción a propósito de que Milly no fuese su princesa.

—Pues claro que no lo es. Antes tiene usted que hacer algo.

Densher se quedó pensativo.

—¿No es ella quien tendría que hacerlo?

La dejó más cortada de lo que pretendía.

—Entiendo. Sí. Sin duda, puede interpretarse así. —Su alegría quedó momentáneamente eclipsada, y se dedicó a contemplar la sala sin mirarle a los ojos, como si no supiera muy bien qué era lo que podía hacer Milly—. Sin embargo, ha intentado ser amable.

Él tuvo enseguida la sensación de haberse portado como un grosero.

—Y lo ha sido. No conozco a nadie tan encantador. Me ha tratado como si fuese alguien importante. Si me dice que es una anfitriona como nunca había imaginado, no podré estar más de acuerdo. Por supuesto —añadió en el tono indicado—, me hago cargo de que es como la vida en la corte.

Ella demostró en el acto que eso era lo único que quería de él.

—A eso me refería, si lo entiende usted como una corte única en el mundo: una de las cortes del cielo, la corte de un serafín reinante, una especie de reina regente de un ángel. Eso es.

—Bueno, entonces se lo concedo. Lo que ocurre es que la vida en la corte, por lo general, no es fácil —observó.

—Sí, eso he leído; pero esto no es como en los libros. En eso consiste su belleza; por eso es una princesa única. Con ella, en su corte —dijo la señora Stringham—, la vida es fácil. —Luego añadió como zanjando el asunto—: Ya tendrá ocasión de comprobarlo.

Densher esperó un poco, pero no dijo nada que pudiera desanimarla.

—Creo que no iba usted descaminada. Uno tiene que hacer algo antes.

—Bueno, usted ya ha hecho algo.

—No… no creo. Puedo hacer más.

En fin, pareció decir ella, ¡si insistía!

—Puede hacer usted lo que quiera.

«Lo que quiera» era demasiado para tomárselo en serio y cambió de tema con modestia para que no lo tomase por un fatuo.

—¿Por qué ha mandado llamar a *sir* Luke Strett si, como dice, se encuentra mucho mejor?

—No lo ha mandado llamar. Ha venido él por su cuenta —explicó la señora Stringham—. Quería venir.

—Entonces, ¿no será peor… si es que está intranquilo?

—Iba a venir de todos modos por vacaciones. Ella hace semanas que lo sabe. —Tras lo cual la señora Stringham añadió—: Usted puede tranquilizarlo.

—¿Yo? —preguntó con ingenuidad. Sin duda era un círculo de enaguas—. ¿Qué importancia puedo tener para a un hombre como él?

—¿Cómo sabe cómo es? —preguntó su amiga—. No se parece a ninguno de sus conocidos. Es un hombre benévolo y extraordinario.

—Entonces no me necesita. Como profano no tengo derecho a entrometerme.

—De todos modos —insistió la señora Stringham—, dígale lo que opina.

—¿Lo que opino de la señorita Theale? —Densher la miró fijamente. Era, como suele decirse, pedir demasiado. Pero encontró la respuesta apropiada—. Eso a él no le concierne.

Por un momento, la señora Stringham pareció pensar que era la respuesta apropiada. Se le quedó mirando con ojos fijos, pero inquisitivos, que parecían dejar ver lo que opinaba, aunque él no supo interpretarlo hasta más tarde.

—Dígaselo entonces. Cualquier cosa le servirá para romper el hielo.

—Y ¿por qué iba a querer romper el hielo?

—Dele ocasión de hacerlo. Deje que hable con usted. Entonces lo verá.

Todo lo dicho por la señora Stringham agudizó la sensación de Densher de estar inmerso en un elemento de una tibieza más extraña que agradable, una sensación que alimentarían hasta la saciedad muchas otras impresiones en las dos o tres horas siguientes. Milly bajó después de la cena, para entonces habían llegado ya media docena de amigos —que al parecer sólo conocían las damas de Lancaster Gate—; y con la atención que exigieron, la llegada justo después de los músicos acompañados de Eugenio y a quienes ella saludó uno por uno, y la oportunidad ofrecida por la entrada del eminente médico, que se presentó el último, Densher notó cómo la joven se disolvía en amplias y cálidas olas bajo el hechizo de una beatífica blandura. Sin duda eran más profundas para unos que para otros; Densher tuvo la sensación de que a él le llegaban hasta el cuello. Se movía sin salpicar; flotaba, nadaba sin ruido con todos los demás, como peces en un estanque cristalino. Probablemente tuviesen mucho que ver el efecto del lugar, la belleza de la escena; la elegancia dorada de los elevados salones, museos en sí mismos, ejercía su influencia y volvía a los invitados afables sin ser solemnes. Eran sólo gente, como había dicho la señora Stringham, que iba a quedarse una o dos semanas en sus hoteles y que ese día había manoseado sus Baedekers, contemplado boquiabierta los frescos y discutido por fracciones de franco con sus gondoleros. Pero Milly, mientras iba y venía entre ellos con un maravilloso vestido blanco, los iba poniendo en contacto con algo más refinado y cordial; de modo que aunque no llegasen a componer el cuadro de Veronese del que había hablado la señora Stringham, el prosaísmo de las horas previas, los vestigios de insensibilidad creados por los «regateos», quedaron casi noblemente olvidados. Tal vez tuviese algo que ver en su impresión que era la primera vez que la veía de blanco, aunque la joven todavía no había tenido oportunidad, mientras circulaba con una transparencia intensificada, de parecerle felizmente omnipresente. Estaba distinta, más joven, más guapa, tal vez el color de su cabello trenzado llamase la atención más que nunca de un modo no del todo afortunado; pero él se resistió a explicarlo porque, por esa vez, hubiese renunciado, por alguna razón oscura y sin duda encantadora, al hasta entonces inveterado negro casi monacal. Por mucho que el cambio realzara el valor de su presencia, no lo había hecho, puestos a decirlo todo, por él; y le divirtió pensar que se debía a la visita de *sir* Luke Strett. Si hubiese podido sentir celos de *sir* Luke Strett, cuyo rostro y tipo enérgicos, tal vez menos integrados en la escena que los demás, observaba de vez en cuando desde el otro extremo del salón, le habría hecho mucha gracia. Pero no podía sentir envidia, ni siquiera para aprovechar esas oleadas; se sentía demasiado inmerso en ellas, como habría dicho él, le bastaba con reflexionar un instante para sumergirse más que nadie. El modo en que Milly le descuidó para atender a otros, mientras Kate y la señora Lowder, sin el consuelo de una broma siquiera, le presentaban a las damas inglesas, era en sí mismo una prueba; pues nunca habían estado en comunión tan íntima como la creada por la mirada brillante y las tres palabras alegres (ostensiblemente frívolas) que abierta y conscientemente le dedicó al pasar.

Esa noche estaba ejerciendo de anfitriona, llevada por una idea suprema, una inspiración que era en parte nerviosa y en parte una armonía inevitable; pero lo que reconoció en especial fue el carácter que ya había entrevisto en varias ocasiones y que, extrañamente, Milly parecía capaz de mostrar u ocultar a voluntad o llevada por una afinidad instintiva. Era la joven norteamericana tal como la había visto la primera vez, tal como la había visto sobre todo en determinados momentos en Nueva York. Era la joven norteamericana tal como, aún más que entonces, la había visto el día que se encontraron en Londres en

compañía de Kate. Le parecía un poderoso y extraño recurso social que ningún hombre, en su nimiedad, podría dominar jamás; y no habría sabido si considerarlo una extensión o una contracción de la «personalidad», pues era ante todo una pasmosa extensión de la superficie. Era evidente que era lo mejor para esa noche: lo comprendió por una palabra de Kate, cuando se le acercó para infligirle una segunda presentación. Con el pretexto de que empezaba la música, se había escabullido de la señora que le había presentado antes; y algo le recordó vagamente la conversación que habían tenido en la piazza. ¿Qué castigo intentaba imponerle por lo que le había hecho? No pudo entonces menos que pensar que había conseguido algo: no sólo había obligado a la perfecta inteligencia de Kate a actuar en interés de él, sino que no le había dejado ninguna posibilidad de escapar, con un simple acto de voluntad, a su lógica inatacable. En su presencia o cerca de él —tal como había quedado claro en la cena—, no tenía escapatoria: lo único que podía hacer era plantear sin más la cuestión y rendirse francamente o debatirse en vano, o discutir cínicamente, o también expresarse aprovechando la ventaja que tenía. Parte de esa ventaja —un pequeño y falaz contrapeso a la presión ejercida por él— consistía en que había muchas cosas en las que todavía podía hacer valer su voluntad. Pero esas impresiones sólo sirvieron para subrayar lo mucho que, en las distancias cortas, podía hacer valer él la suya; y le bastó con notar que su misma apariencia, tan distinta, a su modo, de la de Milly, le recordaba el sentido de sus actos. Nunca como en esos minutos había tenido ocasión de conocer, casi de degustar materialmente, eso que vulgarmente se llama conquista. Había vivido lo suficiente para que lo quisieran, pero nunca de ese modo y en un lugar semejante. Era un amor mayor que el de Milly… o lo sería, dependía sólo de él. En todo caso, así lo interpretó mientras reparaba en que Kate había perdido parte de su esplendor. Como presencia joven y llamativa había sido superada, difuminada por la dulzura exhalada por Milly; era como si esa noche se hubiese puesto ella el discreto vestido negro que la anfitriona había descartado. Era el polo opuesto de la maravillosa entrada, bajo la mirada de su tía —no lo había olvidado—, el día en que su joven amiga pudo presentarse en Lancaster Gate. En su aceptada discreción —era precisamente la aceptación lo que reparaba el daño y aumentaba su belleza— seguía bajo la mirada de su tía, pero ¿qué ojos no estaban atentos y preocupados? Sin embargo, le pareció que casi lo primero que dijo fue un exquisito intento de parecer escéptica o al menos dueña de sí misma.

—¿Qué opinas de ella ahora?

Casi sin reparar en el peligro de tomarse abiertamente libertades, Densher miró a Milly desde donde se encontraban y la vio en renovada conversación, sobre las piezas que debían interpretar, con los miembros de su pequeña orquesta, que le hablaban con demostraciones de deferencia animadas por el humor nativo muy en la línea de la vieja comedia veneciana. La idea de la joven de tener música había sido afortunada: un auténtico disolvente de la timidez, pero no drástico; gracias a las pausas, la discreción y la compasión por aquel grupo de bárbaros que reflejaban los buenos modales de sus intérpretes, representantes de un orden en el que el buen gusto era natural y la melodía exuberante. Fue fácil, en cualquier caso, responderle a Kate:

—¡Ah, mi vida, sabes que siempre he tenido muy buena opinión de ella!

—Pero está preciosa —replicó extasiada Kate—. Todo le queda tan… sobre todo las perlas. Combinan tan bien con las puntillas antiguas. Vale la pena pararse a admirarlas. —Densher, aunque estaba seguro de haberlas visto, tal vez no se hubiese «parado» a admirarlas y por tanto no había hecho justicia a la poesía personificada —su imaginación, en lo que se refería a Milly, seguía viéndola así— que les debía parte de su estilo. El rostro de Kate, mientras las observaba, le sorprendió: el largo collar de valor incalculable, enrollado con dos vueltas en torno al cuello, colgaba, macizo y puro, por debajo del pecho de la anfitriona: tanto que el gesto, sin duda inconsciente, de Milly de sujetarlo y toquetearlo y retorcerlo vagamente, probablemente tuviese que ver con la comodidad—. Es una paloma —continuó Kate— y uno no imagina a una paloma con joyas. Aunque le sientan de maravilla.

—Sí, ésa es la palabra. —Densher vio cómo le sentaban, pero tal vez reparó aún más en el modo tan intenso en que las miraba su compañera. Milly era sin duda una paloma; ésa era la figura, aplicable sobre todo a su espíritu. Sin embargo, comprendió al instante que en ese momento, por razones que se le ocultaban, Kate estaba bajo la impresión de ese elemento de riqueza en ella que era un poder, un enorme poder, y que sólo recordaba a una paloma si uno tenía presente que las palomas tienen alas y vuelos maravillosos, además de colores delicados y suaves arrullos. Incluso se le ocurrió vagamente que esas alas podían en ocasiones —y así había sido en ese caso— abrirse protectoras. ¿Acaso no se habían extendido y no estaban Kate, y la señora Lowder, Susan Shepherd y él, él en particular, acurrucados cómodamente debajo de ellas? Fue como un resplandor más luminoso en la luz general, en la que oía hablar a Kate.

—Las perlas tienen tal magia que le sientan bien a todo el mundo.

—A ti te quedarían muy bien —respondió con franqueza.

—¡Oh, sí, me parece estar viéndome!

De pronto a él también le pareció verla: habría estado espléndida, y al mismo tiempo intuyó lo que pensaba Kate. El suntuoso ornamento de Milly había adoptado —bajo una presión no del todo oculta— el carácter de símbolo de una diferencia, una diferencia que podía apreciarse en su rostro. También podría haber visto en él que, por mucho que le gustaran las perlas, Merton Densher nunca podría dárselas. ¿No era ésa la gran diferencia que simbolizaba Milly esa noche? Inconscientemente representaba para Kate, que lo notaba en todos sus poros, que no había nadie con quien Milly tuviese menos que ver que con una joven guapa casada con un hombre incapaz de hacerle un solo regalo de ese estilo. No obstante, Densher no pensó hasta después en todos esos absurdos. En ese momento sólo podía pensar en lo que la señora Stringham le había dicho antes de la cena. No podía sino recordar la pregunta de su amiga un minuto antes.

—Desde luego está preciosa, como tú dices, y además me han dicho que se encuentra mejor. Hace una o dos horas la señora Stringham no dejaba de repetirlo. Está claro que cree que está mejor.

—Bueno, ¡si prefieren llamarlo así…!

—Y ¿cómo lo llamas tú… a diferencia de ellas?

—Sólo hablo de esto contigo. ¡No tengo «diferencias» con ellas! —añadió Kate como con un aliento fresco de impaciencia por todo lo que tenía que explicarle.

—Eso decía —respondió—. ¿Cómo lo llamas conmigo?

Ella esperó un instante.

—No está mejor. Está peor. Aunque no tiene nada que ver.

—¿Nada que ver? —preguntó.

Pero ella fue clara.

—Con nosotros. Excepto, claro, que hacemos todo lo que podemos por ella. Hacemos que quiera vivir. —Y Kate volvió a observarla—. Esta noche quiere vivir. —Lo dijo con una dulzura que tuvo la extraña propiedad de parecerle incoherente… tan implacable, y sin duda injusta, había sido su claridad—. Es maravilloso. Muy hermoso.

—Sin duda.

Por alguna razón Densher odió la impotencia de su voz, pero ella no se dio cuenta.

—Lo hace por él —y movió la cabeza señalando al médico de Milly—. Quiere aparentar que está bien. Pero no puede engañarle.

Densher también lo había estado mirando y eso le empujó a preguntar:

—Y ¿crees que tú sí? Me refiero a tus sentimientos, si se va a quedar con nosotros. ¡Si la tía Maud se lleva tan bien con él…!

La tía Maud ocupaba de hecho un sitio al lado de *sir* Luke y hacía cuanto podía por entretenerle, aunque eso no impidió que el médico desviara la mirada, atraído, como ocurre en esos casos, precisamente por la atención de otros; Densher lo notó y también Kate que dijo enseguida:

—Te está mirando. Quiere hablar contigo.

—Ya me lo advirtió la señora Stringham —se rio el joven.

—Pues déjale. Sé franco con él. No necesito —dijo Kate en respuesta a su anterior pregunta— engañarle. Si es necesario, ya se encargará la tía Maud. No sabe nada de mí, así que me verá como me vea ella. Y ahora me ve con buenos ojos. Él no tiene nada que ver conmigo.

—Excepto para reprobarte —sugirió Densher.

—¿Por no hacerte caso? Muy bien. Así quiero que te conozca: como un joven brillante empujado a una relación con Milly por mi indiferencia.

—Bueno —dijo Densher con bastante sinceridad—. Creo que puedo agradecerte que me dejes con alguien que tal vez sea más amable conmigo que tú.

Entretanto Kate buscaba con la mirada a la amiga de la señora Lowder a la que quería presentarle y que había cambiado de sitio.

—Razón de más para dejarte con *lady* Wells.

—¡Oh!, espera… —No fue sólo que viese a *lady* Wells a lo lejos, que no sintiera ninguna prisa por conocerla y que, en algún rincón de su cerebro, fuese consciente de la cuestión, todavía incipiente, de si era la clase de persona con quien le gustaría relacionarse cuando se casaran. Fue además que, en ese instante, se agudizó la sensación de que había algo que no había conseguido de Kate esa mañana y que, lógicamente, le afectaba, por no hablar de su impresión de que debía exprimir cada instante en vista de la escasez de oportunidades de estar con ella. Si la tía Maud, allí al lado de *sir* Luke, notaba que estaba un poco «atento», podía pasar por una fútil demostración por parte de un caballero obligado a admitir, sin demasiada elegancia, que ha cambiado de opinión. Además, justo en ese momento, no le preocupaba la tía Maud

excepto por una cosa—. ¿Cómo puede la señora Lowder pensar que se ha librado de mí definitivamente sólo porque me vea vinculado a una joven moribunda? Si estás en lo cierto respecto a la salud de Milly, te equivocas al creer que hemos engañado a la señora Lowder. Si, como dices —prosiguió con lucidez—, Milly no puede engañar a un cirujano eminente, o lo que sea, el cirujano eminente no engañará a los demás, no a sus allegados más próximos. No a la señora Stringham, que es la mejor amiga de Milly; y sería muy raro que ella engañase a la tía Maud, que es a su vez su mejor amiga.

Kate le hizo ver el frío brillo de una idea que realmente compensaba el hecho de tenerla a su lado.

—¿Qué tiene de raro? Me asombra tu cortedad de miras.

Incluso la simple curiosidad, acerca de su compañera, tenía ahora una intensidad aguda y temblorosa. Sabemos que una vez la había comparado a un «libro nuevo», un volumen intonso de una calidad rara y excepcional; y su emoción (para justificarlo) volvía a ser como la agitación que se siente al pasar la página.

—Bueno, ya sabes lo mucho que me maravilla cómo lo ves tú.

—Nada hace pensar —prosiguió Kate— que eso que llamas la disposición de la señora Stringham a engañar tenga nada de raro. ¿Por qué no querría ocultar la verdad?

—¿A la señora Lowder? —Densher la miró fijamente—. ¿Por qué?

—Para complacerte.

—Y ¿por qué iba a complacerme eso?

Kate volvió la cabeza como si de verdad se hubiese hartado de su estupidez. Sin embargo, volvió a mirarlo al hablar.

—Pues para complacer a Milly. —Y, antes de que pudiera responder, añadió—: ¿Todavía no te has dado cuenta de que no hay nada que Susan Shepherd no esté dispuesta a hacer por ti?

Pasado un instante, no tuvo más remedio que admitirlo, en vista de lo mucho que se correspondía con su forma de atenderlo hacía poco. Volvió a parecerle raro el modo en que todas lo rodeaban. Pero eso ya lo sabía y las luces de Kate lo seguían guiando adelante. No obstante, lo admitió con ciertas reservas.

—Es una mujer muy amable. Pero su opinión de lo que está bien podría no coincidir con la tuya.

—¿En qué puede ser distinta si la pone a tu servicio?

Densher se contuvo un instante, pero sólo un instante.

—¡Oh, lo malo es que te aseguro que no sé cómo la tuya puede estar a mi servicio!

—Pues piensa que ponerte tú al mío —respondió sin más Kate— puede servirte de ayuda. Te permite ganar tiempo.

—Tiempo ¿para qué?

—¡Para todo! —Al principio habló, una vez más, con impaciencia; luego, como de costumbre, se dominó —. Para cualquier cosa que pueda suceder.

Densher había esbozado una sonrisa, pero él mismo notó que era tensa.

—¡Eres muy críptica, cariño!

Ella le miró y él reparó en que, por uno de esos impulsos incalculables sin los que no habría sido ni la mitad de interesante, se le llenaban de lágrimas procedentes de alguna fuente que había tocado con demasiada brusquedad.

—Estoy haciendo por ti cosas que jamás soñé que haría por nadie.

Él se conmovió y se ruborizó, pero la respuesta acudió enseguida a sus labios.

—Bueno, ¿acaso he dejado de insistirte en que puedo conjurar todas las dificultades? —dejó aflorar otra vez su insistencia; igual que había hecho toda la semana—. No tiene por qué haber ninguna entre nosotros. Sólo lo que sentimos el uno por el otro.

Al principio, sólo sirvió para secarle los ojos mientras toqueteaba uno de los numerosos eslabones de la ajustada cadena.

—Puedes decirle lo que quieras, cualquier cosa.

—¿A la señora Stringham? No tengo nada que decirle.

—Puedes hablarle de nosotros —continuó para su sorpresa—. Contarle que aún me quieres, digo.

Tan sorprendente fue que hasta le pareció gracioso.

—Pero no que tú me quieres a mí…

Ella no prestó atención a su buen humor.

—Estoy totalmente seguro de que no se lo contará.

—Ya entiendo. A la tía Maud.

—No entiendes nada. Ni a la tía Maud ni a nadie. —Comprendió entonces que Kate conocía, después de todo, mucho mejor a Milly que él; y volvió a demostrarlo cuando añadió—: Ahí tienes tu ocasión.

Por fin le hizo pensar, y fue como si se hiciera la luz, aunque no de golpe.

—Permite que te diga que sí lo entiendo. Una ocasión para algo en particular que, según creo, te parece posible. Una ocasión que por lo visto también puede serlo para ti.

—Desde luego. —Animada por aquel fulgor de concentración por su parte, lo miró a través del aire que tan penosamente había despejado, aunque sin bajar la guardia del todo—. Pero no pienses que voy a ponértelo tan fácil. Si quieres decir las cosas tendrás que llamarlas por su nombre.

Densher llevaba un minuto pensando en cómo llamarlas y sólo encontró un modo que encajase; por fin la miró fijamente:

—¿Que, ya que se va a morir, tengo que casarme con ella?

Incluso entonces le pareció elegante que no torciese el gesto ni anduviera con remilgos. Podría haber aprovechado el silencio, las condiciones establecidas, y haberle respondido sólo con la mirada. Pero sus labios se movieron valientemente.

—Tienes que casarte con ella.

—Para que en su momento, cuando acontezca la muerte, tenga dinero.

Ahora lo veía claro y no le quedaban más preguntas, sólo una notable frialdad al pensar que había sido lo único que ella había querido —pese a la estupidez y la timidez de él— todo ese tiempo. Curiosamente, ahora que Densher lo había entendido, ella era incapaz de pronunciar las palabras que no había pronunciado; su voz controlada e inexpresiva las dijo como si le avergonzara titubear al final.

—En su momento tendrás dinero. En su momento seremos libres.

—¡Oh, oh, oh! —murmuró Densher.

—Sí, sí, sí —luego le soltó—: Ven a ver a *lady* Wells.

Él no se movió… Tenía demasiadas cosas en las que pensar.

—¿Quieres que la pida en matrimonio… sin más?

No necesitó imprimir ironía a sus palabras: cuanto más sencilla era su forma de hablar más irónico parecía. Pero ella siguió inmutable.

—¡Oh!, no puedo planear eso contigo y, si no rompes conmigo, no creo que debas preguntármelo. Tienes que hacer lo que puedas como mejor te parezca.

Él volvió a reflexionar.

—Creía haberte demostrado esta mañana que no hay nada más lejos de mi intención que romper contigo.

—Entonces —respondió Kate—, de acuerdo.

—¿De acuerdo? —sus ansias se inflamaron—. ¿Vendrás a verme?

Pero enseguida comprobó que no quería decir eso.

—Tendrás las manos libres, el campo despejado, una oportunidad… en fin, ideal.

—Tus descripciones —¡lo de «ideal» había sido un toque maestro!— son prodigiosas. Lo que no entiendo es cómo puede gustarte, si me quieres.

—No me gusta, pero, gracias a Dios, soy una persona capaz de hacer lo que no le gusta.

Después, al recordarlo, Densher comprendió que había una especie de eco heroico en estas palabras, una nota personal que disminuyó su propia incapacidad para la acción. Sin embargo, incluso entonces, apreció la grandeza de saber tan bien lo que uno quiere. En ese momento pensó además que al fin y al cabo él sabía lo que había hecho. Sin embargo fueron otras las palabras que afloraron a sus labios.

—Entonces lo que no entiendo es cómo lo soportas.

—Bueno, cuando me conozcas mejor descubrirás lo mucho que soy capaz de soportar. —Y continuó antes de que él pudiera comprender, por así decirlo, las numerosas implicaciones de sus palabras. Que todavía tenía que conocerla «mejor» espiritualmente, después de su largo sacrificio al conocimiento, era, por ejemplo, una verdad que no estaba preparado para que le dijesen a la cara. Dios sabía que lo había confundido mucho, pero era más por su propia generosidad que por la de ella. Y ¿qué parecía insinuar que podía hacer ella en sus manos? A pesar de esas preguntas seguía manejándolo—. Lo único que tienes que hacer es quedarte.

—Y ¿seguir con el asunto delante de tus narices?

—¡Oh, no…! Nosotras nos iremos.

—¿Os iréis? —preguntó sorprendido—. ¿Cuándo, adónde?

—Directas a casa… dentro de un día o dos. La tía Maud quiere marcharse cuanto antes.

Densher tuvo que esforzarse por entenderlo.

—Y ¿qué será de la señorita Theale?

—Lo que te he dicho. Se quedará y tú con ella.

Él la miró fijamente.

—¿Solos?

Kate sonrió como en respuesta a su tono.

—Ya sois mayorcitos… y os hartaréis de ver a la señora Stringham.

Nada podría haberle extrañado tanto, si hubiese podido medirlo, como ser capaz de sentir, mientras ella le iba diciendo todas estas cosas, que en esencia estaba «viendo lo que iba a responder», un instinto compatible por tanto con esa ausencia de la necesidad de conocerla mejor a la que un momento antes ella había aludido tan injustamente. Si no hubiese comprendido con un fogonazo que ella acabaría derrumbándose, probablemente no habría podido seguir. Sin embargo, como no se derrumbaba, no le quedaba más remedio que continuar.

—Lo de marcharos ¿ha sido idea de la señora Lowder?

—Desde luego que sí. Por supuesto; ya ves lo que está dispuesta a hacer por nosotros. Y no hablo —añadió— sólo de marcharse, sino de su opinión sobre el decoro general del asunto.

—Ya lo entiendo, como tú dices —dijo Densher al cabo de un momento—. Todo encaja.

—Todo.

La palabra, por un instante, quedó suspendida en el aire, y Densher podría haber tenido la sensación de estar contemplando, de manera nada vaga, su significado. Pero, de hecho, estaba pensando en otra cosa.

—Entonces ¿vais a dejarla aquí para morir?

—¡Ah!, ella cree que no morirá si te quedas. La tía Maud, digo.

—Y ¿eso es lo único que importa?

Kate seguía sin derrumbarse.

—¿No acordamos hace mucho que lo que ella crea es lo más importante para nosotros?

Él lo recordó, mientras Kate le miraba: era como si hubiese ocurrido hacía mucho tiempo.

—¡Oh, sí! No puedo negarlo. —Luego añadió—: Así que, si me quedo…

—No será culpa nuestra —se apresuró a responder ella.

—¿No será culpa nuestra si la señora Lowder sospecha, a pesar de todo, de nosotros?

—Si sospecha de nosotros. Aunque no lo hará.

Lo dijo con una intensidad que podría haberle dejado a él sin palabras, y de hecho no habría sabido qué responder si no se le hubiese ocurrido decir:

—Pero ¿y si no me acepta?

Al oírlo Kate pareció tan fatigada que a él le conmovió su tono paciente:

—Lo único que puedes hacer es probar suerte.

—Claro que puedo probar suerte. Pero, no sé si me entiendes, hay que esforzarse mucho para probar suerte con una joven moribunda.

—Para ti no es una moribunda. —Había inspirado en Kate un destello de rectitud que tal vez podría haberle parecido admirable, pues su respuesta era en parte cierta. Ante sus ojos estaba la impresión que le había causado Milly esa noche, y su compañera, mirándole a los ojos y sondeando sus profundidades, se aferró literalmente a ella como a un triunfo. Volvió la cabeza hacia donde estaba su amiga, él hizo lo propio y los dos se quedaron observándola un minuto. Milly, desde el otro lado, se dio cuenta y a modo de respuesta les dedicó todo el candor de su sonrisa, el lustre de sus perlas, el valor de su vida, la esencia de su riqueza. Eso volvió a unirlos con un gesto solemne por la realidad que acababa de prestar a su plan. La propia Kate palideció un poco, y por un instante se limitaron a guardar silencio. La música, no obstante, alegre y vociferante, había vuelto a empezar y los protegió en lugar de interrumpirlos. Cuando Densher habló por fin lo hizo oculto por ella.

—Podría quedarme y no probar suerte.

—¡Oh!, quedarte equivale a probar suerte.

—¿Eso es lo que le parecerá a ella?

—No se me ocurre una manera mejor de darle esa impresión.

Densher esperó.

—¿Crees posible que pueda ofrecérseme en matrimonio?

—¡No se me ocurre, si de verdad quieres saberlo, qué podría no ofrecerte!

—¿Al estilo de las princesas, que hacen esas cosas?

—De cualquier modo que se te ocurra. Así que más vale que estés preparado.

Bueno, casi parecía estarlo.

—En ese caso aceptaré. Pero tendrá que ser así.

Kate guardó silencio como haciendo caso omiso de sus palabras, pero enseguida dijo:

—¿Me das tu palabra de honor de que te quedarás?

Su respuesta se hizo esperar, pero cuando llegó no pudo ser más clara.

—¿Dices sin ti?

—Sin nosotras.

—Y partiréis a lo sumo…

—El jueves como muy tarde.

Eran tres días.

—Bueno —dijo—. Tienes mi palabra de honor de que me quedaré, si prometes ir a verme.

Una vez más, como antes, ella se puso tan rígida que sólo acertó a mirar a su alrededor. No obstante, su rigidez representaba más para él que su buena disposición; pues la buena disposición era la mujer en sí misma, mientras que lo otro era una máscara, un parche y una «evasiva». El caso es que miró a su alrededor, y no en vano. Sus ojos recorrieron el salón y dieron con un pretexto.

—*Lady* Wells se ha cansado de esperar, mira, viene hacia aquí.

Densher lo vio, pero aún los separaba una distancia considerable y tenía tiempo.

—Si no aceptas, no acepto. No haré nada.

—Nada… —sonó como si quisiera implorarle.

—Nada. Me iré antes que vosotras. Mañana mismo.

Después, Densher tendría la sensación de que, como suele decirse, incluso para los triunfos más vulgares, ella había comprendido que hablaba en serio. Kate volvió a mirar a *lady* Wells, que estaba más cerca, pero enseguida miró a Densher.

—Y ¿si acepto?

—Lo haré todo.

Kate encontró un nuevo pretexto en la cercanía de su amiga: Densher estaba jugando con su orgullo. Nunca, comprendió entonces, había saboreado en su relación con ella nada tan intenso, demasiado intenso para ser dulce, como la vivacidad con que comprendió que era él quien dominaba la situación.

—Está bien, acepto.

—¿Palabra de honor?

—Palabra de honor.

—¿Irás?

—Iré.

Libro IX

I

Hasta que no se marcharon no reparó de verdad en la diferencia, que notaba sobre todo cuando estaba en su vieja y descolorida habitación. Se había reencontrado desde el principio con parte de su apego por esa escena, que incluía el puente del Rialto en el lado más próximo de aquel abanico de recuerdos y el canal que se alejaba a la izquierda; la había visto bajo una luz particular a la que sus manos y su imaginación la habían ido adaptando poco a poco; pero el interés que tenía ahora la habitación para él había aumentado de pronto y se había convertido en una fuerza que le retenía y absorbía y de la que sólo encontraba alivio —si es que puede decirse esa palabra— alejándose de allí. Lo sucedido entre aquellas paredes perduraba como una obsesión que afectaba a todos sus sentidos; revivía, igual que un puñado de recuerdos agradables, a cada instante, a todas horas y con cualquier motivo; todo lo demás se volvía insípido e irrelevante. Era, en una palabra, una presencia consciente y vigilante, activa en sí misma, con la que tenía que contar constantemente, y ante la cual cualquier esfuerzo por distanciarse parecía no tanto fútil como frívolo. Kate había ido a verle; sólo una vez: y no porque no quisiera ir más veces, sino por diversas imposibilidades que ni el valor ni la sutileza pudieron esquivar; pero en aquella ocasión se había entregado de verdad, como suele decirse; y ni aunque hubiese querido habría podido Densher expulsar de aquel cuarto lo que había sobrevivido de ella, lo que seguía recordándosela con insistencia. Por suerte no quería, aunque cualquier hombre habría intuido algo horrible en una consecuencia tan incalificable de sus actos. Sencillamente había hecho realidad su idea, la idea que había empujado a Kate a aceptar; y el éxito que eso representaba se extendía hasta donde llegaba la vista. No era, por otro lado, más que la idea aplicada directamente y transformada de luminosa ocurrencia en verdad histórica. La había conocido antes, pero en forma de ansia y de deseo en los que había insistido convincentemente en nombre de la ventaja que supondrían; de manera que ahora, una vez aprovechada la ventaja, parecía reconocer sus oficios y dejar, para la fe y la memoria, una insistencia propia. Había, en suma, concedido por adelantado un valor incalculable al compromiso de su amiga, y ahora tenía plena conciencia de dicho valor. ¿No sería incluso el valor el que le poseía a él y le obligaba a esperar, a pensar, a darle vueltas y más vueltas y a asegurarse en todos los sentidos?

Desempeñaba para él —sobre todo en las primeras horas después de aquella especie de fulgor— el papel de un tesoro escondido en la casa en un lugar sagrado y seguro, algo que sabía que volvería a encontrar en su sitio cuando a su regreso metiera la vieja y maciza llave en la cerradura. Bastaba con abrir la puerta para volver a notarlo en todas partes; y de un modo tan intenso que, como suele decirse, para él no era posible otro acto que el acto renovado, casi la alucinación, de la intimidad. Dondequiera que mirase, o se sentase, o se plantara, cualquiera que fuese el detalle que llamase su atención, no formaba parte del presente, nada nacido del tiempo o la ocasión podía serlo, ni lo sería jamás; era como cuando se alza el telón y los violinistas asisten, noche tras noche, a la función que se representa en el escenario. Se había convertido así, en su propio teatro, en su propia persona, en la orquesta perpetua de la obra en cartel, del último éxito, y tocaba despacio y con sordina, como siempre, en los momentos de máxima importancia. Nadie más fue a visitarle; a veces tropezaba en la piazza o en sus paseos, con gente, recordada u olvidada, que decía conocerle, casi efusiva, a veces incluso inquisitiva, pero él nunca daba sus señas ni propiciaba el trato con nadie; tenía la sensación de no poder abrir por nada del mundo la puerta a una tercera persona. Esa persona le habría interrumpido, habría profanado su secreto o tal vez incluso lo habría adivinado; en cualquier caso habría quebrado el hechizo de lo que —ante la ausencia de pruebas— consideraba que obraba en su interior. Se había entregado —y eso era más que suficiente— al sentimiento de su renovado compromiso de fidelidad. La fuerza de dicho compromiso, la particular solidez del contrato y, sobre todo, el modo en que debía cumplir su parte de un acuerdo por el que le habían pagado con tanta generosidad el precio que él había fijado, ocupaban por completo su conciencia cuando no había nada exterior que lo perturbase. Nunca se vio una conciencia tan concentrada en lo que la ocupaba; y a eso nos referíamos al hablar de la opresión

del éxito, la sensación más bien glacial —que invitaba a la soledad— del reconocimiento supremo. Si era un poco horrible sentirse tan justificado, era por la pérdida de calor del elemento de misterio: en lugar de él reinaba la lucidez y eso era lo que él se sentaba a contemplar fijamente. Se desembarazaba de ella una docena de veces al día, intentaba romper esa comunión calmada y continua. Ella no había querido legarle una comunión calmada, sino algo muy diferente, una especie de fidelidad que también podía llamarse una acción prudente.

Densher era perfectamente consciente de que no había nada menos parecido a una acción prudente que ese éxtasis del que disfrutaba cuando estaba en casa. Lo más raro era que para ser fiel a Kate tenía que apartar de ella sus ojos, sus brazos, sus labios: tenía que dejarla. Tenía que recordar que era hora de ir al palacio… lo cual era, de hecho, un alivio, pues la contención resultaba tan eficaz como imperativa. Lo que ocurría, por suerte, hasta entonces era que al cerrar la puerta la dejaba recluida. Se apartaba de ella, nada más alejarse un poco, y antes de llegar al palacio, y con más razón después de oír cerrarse el enorme *portone* a sus espaldas, se sentía lo bastante libre para no reparar en que su situación era opresiva y falsa. Kate lo era todo en su pobre habitación, y en esos salones suntuosos no era ni siquiera una sombra, así que sólo reflexionando podía reparar en su falsedad; mientras estuviese a merced de la suerte benévola, no tendría rostro ni le exigiría cosas que no podía concederle sin agravar los sentimientos que ocultaba en su interior. Ese agravamiento había sido lo que le había horrorizado al principio; sin embargo, ¿acaso no disminuía el horror en presencia de Milly? Tal vez no llegara a desaparecer del todo, y todavía podía inmiscuirse la vergüenza. Sin embargo, cada vez hacía un poco más lo que prefería y de momento eso le mantenía a salvo. Lo que prefería era, en cualquier caso, saber por qué las cosas eran como las sentía; y, en este caso, diez días después que partieran sus otras amigas, lo sabía muy bien. Además, comprendía perfectamente que —aun enalteciendo al máximo la pureza de sus motivos— no habían sido ni Kate ni él, sino Milly quien había hecho que su extraña relación con ella fuese, en la medida de lo posible, inocente; no habían sido ellos quienes la habían purificado, si es que estaba purificada. Al menos en lo que a él concernía, Milly se encargaba de todo: Milly, y la casa de Milly, y la hospitalidad de Milly, y los modales de Milly, y la personalidad de Milly, y, tal vez más que ninguna otra cosa, la imaginación de Milly, aunque desde luego la señora Stringham y *sir* Luke le ayudaran un poco; gracias a todo ello disfrutó de la suerte de tener un buen pretexto para preguntarse qué más podía hacer. Algo incalculable actuaba por ellos, por Kate y por él; algo exterior, que estaba por encima de ellos, fuera de su alcance, y sin duda era mucho mejor que ellos: pero eso no era razón para no aprovecharlo. No aprovecharlo, en la medida en que suponía una ventaja, habría equivalido a actuar directamente en su contra; y nada habría perturbado más la generosidad que animaba entonces a Densher que tener que actuar directamente en contra de Milly.

Lo que convenía era seguirle la corriente hasta donde ella quisiera llegar; lo cual, desde el momento en que se negaba a abandonar su amado palacio, sólo era posible quedándose en Venecia. Ésa era, por supuesto, la prueba más clara: y por eso precisamente se lo había pedido Kate; tan clara que la primera tarde la propia Milly se esforzó, con exquisita turbación, en entender sus motivos. Fue como si, ahora que casi se habían quedado solos, le pidiera un nombre con el que pudieran llamar y conocer su intimidad; ya que era casi obvio que su presencia, convertida en algo distinto por la ausencia de los demás, tenía que tener alguna razón clara. Sólo quería saber cuál era esa razón y cómo la describiría él; con eso bastaría: Densher notó que incluso le habría bastado una razón puramente convencional, como que estaba esperando a que le enviasen dinero, ropa, una carta o instrucciones de Fleet Street, sin las que, como tal vez hubiese oído contar, los periodistas no pueden dar un paso. No cayó tan bajo, pero mostró, esa noche, cuando la señora Stringham los dejó solos —la señora Stringham era ciertamente prodigiosa—, un azoramiento mucho mayor que el de Milly. Había pensado que, cuando le preguntara qué hacía o fingía hacer, daría con el tono adecuado; pero hubo tres minutos en los que se sintió incapaz de responder, igual que un caballero al que le han robado la cartera se siente incapaz de comprar. Extrañamente, ni siquiera le ayudó tener la seguridad de que Kate habría hablado de algún modo en su nombre, o no tanto de algún modo como de un modo muy concreto. No le había preguntado, al final, qué le había dicho; y por nada en el mundo se lo habría preguntado después de su visita; sus labios estaban sellados y su espíritu acallado respecto a cualquier acusación contra su libertad. Tan sólo podía interpretar las probabilidades, y, cuando se marchó del palacio una hora después, lo hizo con la sensación de haber respirado, en el aire mismo, la verdad que se había esforzado en adivinar.

Fue justo esa sensación, no obstante, la que le hizo odiar su torpeza. Era horrible turbarse así en presencia de esa criatura; era odioso tener que buscar excusas para la relación que implicaba dicha torpeza. Cualquier relación que implicase algo parecido quedaba tan desacreditada como un plato con una salsa que fuese una medicina. Lo que Kate debía de haberle dicho en una de las últimas conversaciones entre las dos

jóvenes era que —si de verdad Milly quería saber la razón— el señor Densher se había quedado porque a ella no le había quedado más remedio que pedírselo. Si se quedaba, dejaría de seguirla, o al menos su tía tendría esa impresión; y, si dejaba de seguirla, la señora Lowder no podría alegar, en escenas cuya repetición empezaba a ser penosa, que Kate no le trataba con la debida frialdad. En realidad no hacía otra cosa —¿no le habría dicho eso también?—, pero tenía que aplacar las sospechas de la tía Maud. Dicho sea de paso, él se había mostrado muy razonable —ahora podía serlo— y había consentido complacer a la tía y a la sobrina, demostrándoles de la manera más clara que podía vivir lejos de Londres. Vivir lejos de Londres era vivir lejos de Kate Croy, lo que suponía un alivio para ella. Hubo uno de aquellos tres minutos en que temió horrorizado que Milly pudiera aludir a la explicación de su amiga de tal modo que él tuviera que contradecirla. Contradecirla equivalía a destruirlo todo, a destruir probablemente a la propia Kate y a destruir en particular, faltando a su palabra de un modo aún más horrible, la belleza de las últimas horas que habían pasado juntos. Le había dado su palabra de honor de que si iba a verle él haría absolutamente todo lo que ella quisiera, y lo había hecho sabiendo muy bien lo que eso implicaba. Implicaba, por un lado, que esa noche en el gran salón, tan noble con su belleza iluminada sólo en parte, y ante el rostro lívido de su joven anfitriona, divina en su confianza, o en todo caso inescrutable en su piedad, se vería obligado a mentir con sus propios labios. Lo único que podría salvarle sería que Milly le dejara escapar después de asustarle. Su piedad era inescrutable porque, aunque le había dejado escapar más de una vez, lo había hecho, al parecer, sin saber lo cerca que había estado de condenarse.

Eran formalismos trascendentes, no menos sublimes por ser oscuros; gracias a los cuales volvió a notar cómo se aliviaba la presión. Si seguía en pie era, en suma, porque afortunadamente ella no le había enfrentado a la versión de Kate. No podría haber mentido de pie, tenía la sensación de que habría tenido que hincarse de rodillas. Ahora estaba sentado, moviendo nervioso la pierna que tenía cruzada sobre la otra. Milly lamentó que le hubiesen tratado con frialdad, pero él sólo tuvo que corroborar, sin necesidad de cometer perjurio, las tres o cuatro inanidades que había preparado torpemente para esa crisis. Fue un poco más allá de la alusión al dinero, la ropa, las cartas y las instrucciones de su director, y aprovechó la suerte que se le había presentado, como una tentadora pintada por Ticiano, de tener la ocasión de escribir tranquilo. Habló con elocuencia de las dificultades de escribir con calma en Londres y expuso de manera precipitada, casi explosiva, su idea, largo tiempo acariciada, de un libro.

La explosión iluminó el rostro de Milly.

—¿Piensa escribir el libro aquí?

—Espero poder empezarlo.

—¿No está empezado aún?

—Bueno, sólo apenas.

—Y ¿desde su llegada?

Estaba tan interesada que Densher pensó que tal vez no se libraría tan fácilmente.

—Hace unos días quise creer que había conseguido algo.

Pocas respuestas le habrían comprometido tanto.

—Me temo que le hemos hecho perder el tiempo.

—Pues sí. Pero precisamente me quedo para recuperarlo.

—Pues no se preocupe usted por mí.

—Ya verá —dijo intentando afectar desenvoltura— lo poco que pienso preocuparme por nada.

—Necesitará usted —Milly se zambulló enteramente en la cuestión— la mayor parte del día.

Él reflexionó un instante: hizo cuanto pudo para adornarlo con sonrisas.

—¡Oh!, me apañaré con la peor parte. La mejor se la reservaré a usted.

Y le habría gustado que Kate hubiera podido oírle. No era una gran ayuda darle a entender a Milly de manera tan evidente, e incluso patética, que prefería divertirse antes que trabajar con disciplina. Si quería olvidar los desaires de Kate, y la dura ley que le había impuesto, tendría que ser mediante un elevado esfuerzo intelectual. Su cruz era haber despertado así el interés de Milly. Tan interesada estaba que le preguntó si su alojamiento valía para escribir, y él tuvo la sensación de ponerse una máscara para poder responder con un mínimo decoro. La necesitaría sobre todo si ella volvía a expresar su deseo de ir a tomar el té en sus habitaciones: una situación peliaguda de la que comprendió que no iba a librarse.

—Ya sabe que Susie y yo contamos con que no olvide su invitación.

La clave era no acobardarse ante aquel recordatorio, por más que requiriese todo su tacto. En cuanto a la visita en sí misma, ya sabemos que no estaba dispuesto a consentirla bajo ningún concepto, aunque figurase en primer lugar en la lista de las cosas más convenientes elaborada por Kate. Era libre de preguntarse si el criterio de Kate no habría cambiado después de lo ocurrido, pero, aunque decidió que

probablemente no fuese así, no por eso renunció a proceder con tacto. Le gustaba pensar que el «tacto» era su principal puntal en caso de duda; le ayudaba en aquel trance porque era lo indicado para las personas buenas y sensibles. En suma, mientras le sirviera no sería inhumano. Así que tendría que utilizarlo para no endulzar demasiado las esperanzas de Milly. No quería ser grosero, pero tampoco que volvieran a florecer en ese sentido particular; de modo que miró a su alrededor en busca de un término medio y, desafortunadamente, dio un paso en falso.

—¿Le parece prudente alterar su costumbre de no salir de casa?

—¿Prudente…? —Lo miró veinte segundos con un exquisito y pálido brillo en la mirada. ¡Oh!, pero a estas alturas Densher ya no necesitó torcer el gesto; lo había torcido para sus adentros nada más cometer esa equivocación. Había hecho justo lo que ella le había pedido en Londres que no hiciera; había tocado, estando a solas con ella, el nervio hipersensible del que le había hablado. Desde aquella ocasión en Londres no había vuelto a tocarlo; pero notó que ahora le resultaba aún más insoportable. Así que por un momento se quedó más desconcertado que jamás en toda su vida. No podía insistir en que pensaba que estaba muriéndose, pero tampoco podía fingir que la creía indiferente a las precauciones. Entretanto, ella redujo sus posibilidades.

—¿Tan terriblemente enferma cree que estoy?

Abochornado, se replegó sobre sí mismo; pero después de ruborizarse hasta la raíz del cabello dio con lo que estaba buscando.

—Creeré lo que usted me diga.

—Bueno, pues estoy espléndidamente.

—¡Oh!, eso salta a la vista.

—Me refiero a que puedo vivir.

—Nunca lo he dudado.

—¡Sólo digo que tengo muchas ganas de vivir…! —insistió.

—¿Y bien…? —preguntó cuando ella hizo una pausa conmovida.

—Pues que sé que puedo.

—¿Haga lo que haga? —procuró no sonar solemne.

—Haga lo que haga. Si me lo propongo.

—¿Le basta con proponérselo?

—Si quiero vivir, podré vivir —repitió Milly.

Había cometido una torpeza, pero la compasión le hizo dudar.

—¡Ah!, eso sí que lo creo.

—¡Lo haré, lo haré! —exclamó; aunque abrumada por el peso de sus palabras, se volvió hacia él en busca de un poco de luz y del timbre de su voz.

Él tuvo la sensación de sonreír a través de una neblina.

—¡Debe hacerlo!

Eso la devolvió a la primera cuestión.

—En ese caso, ¿por qué no íbamos a poder ir a verle?

—¿La ayudará eso a vivir?

—Todo ayuda —se rio ella— y por lo general quedarme en casa no es tan importante para mí. Sólo que no quisiera faltar…

—¿Sí? —había vuelto a interrumpirse.

—Bueno, el día que nos invite.

Era sorprendente el cambio que había producido en él esa pequeña conversación. Todos sus escrúpulos habían desaparecido de pronto, y habían dejado paso a algo muy extraño y que sólo acertaría a comprender después de marcharse.

—Puede usted venir —dijo— cuando quiera.

No obstante, lo que había sucedido —el abandono, casi violento, de todo lo que no fuese la realidad de la joven— se reflejó al parecer en su rostro o en su actitud de manera tan viva que ella lo tomó por otra cosa.

—Entiendo cómo se siente… Soy una pesada y, antes que tener que soportarme, preferirá usted marcharse. Así que da igual.

—¿Que da igual…? ¡Oh! —se quejó él.

—Si por culpa de eso va a escapar usted de nosotras, preferimos que se quede.

Le pareció un detalle muy hermoso que hablara también por la señora Stringham. Fuese como fuese, en todo caso, él negó con la cabeza.

—No me marcharé.

—Pues ¡yo tampoco iré! —exclamó muy animada.

—¿No vendrá usted a verme?

—No… jamás. Se acabó. Pero no pasa nada. Quiero decir que, aparte de eso —prosiguió—, no haré nada que no deba o a lo que no me vea obligada.

—¡Oh! Y ¿quién va a obligarla a usted? —preguntó en el tono un tanto precario que utilizaba siempre para animarla—. Es la persona menos fácil de coaccionar que conozco.

—¿Tan libre me cree?

—Probablemente sea la persona más libre del mundo. Lo tiene todo.

—Bueno —respondió ella con una sonrisa—, llámelo así. No me quejaré.

Estas palabras hicieron que, muy a su pesar, volviese a meter la pata.

—No, ya sé que usted nunca se queja.

Él mismo notó, nada más decirlo, la lástima que había impregnado sus palabras. Decirle que lo tenía todo había sido una extravagante prueba de humor, mientras que reconocer con tanta ternura que no se quejaba suponía una amable y terrible gravedad. Comprendió que Milly había notado la diferencia; lo mismo podría haberla alabado por mirar cara a cara a la muerte. Ella lo miró como si lo hubiese hecho y de nada sirvió que respondiese con más gentileza que nunca.

—No tiene mérito… cuando una ve su camino.

—¿A la paz y la abundancia? Bueno, supongo que no.

—Me refiero a conservar lo que una tiene.

—¡Oh!, en eso consiste el éxito. Si lo que uno tiene es bueno —se aventuró a decir Densher—, es suficiente para intentarlo.

—Bueno, ése es mi límite. No intento más. —Enseguida cambió de tema—: Y, volviendo a su libro…

—¿Mi libro…? —Por un momento se había olvidado de él.

—El que quiero que sepa que de ningún modo correremos el riesgo de echar a perder ni Susie ni yo.

Densher miró a su alrededor y tomó una decisión.

—No voy a escribir ningún libro.

—¿No me ha dicho que…? —preguntó sorprendida—. ¿No está usted escribiendo?

Él se sintió ya aliviado.

—Le aseguro que no sé lo que estoy haciendo.

Milly adoptó un gesto grave… tanto que, desconcertado en otro sentido, Densher temió lo que ella pudiera entender. Entendió, de hecho, justo lo que él temía, pero una vez más su honor, como él lo llamaba, salió bien librado sin que ella supiese siquiera que lo había puesto en peligro. Milly pensó que sus palabras significaban que él también tenía derecho a quejarse, y quiso animarlo a tener paciencia diciéndole que tal vez ella podría contribuir con su ayuda indirecta. No obstante, aún quedó más claro que quería saber hasta dónde podía aventurarse, y él vio que estaba pasando una especie de prueba.

—Entonces, si no es por su libro…

—¿Quiere saber por qué me quedo?

—Pienso en su trabajo en Londres… en todo lo que tiene que hacer. ¿No es un poco vacío para usted?

—¿Vacío? —Recordó que Kate pensaba que Milly podría proponérsele en matrimonio, y se preguntó si ése sería el modo natural de hacerlo. Comprendió que eso le desconcertaría y tal vez se notase su angustia en la vaguedad de su respuesta—. ¡Oh, bueno…!

—¿Hago demasiadas preguntas? —Ella respondió antes de que tuviese ocasión de protestar—. Se queda porque no tiene más remedio.

Él se aferró a esa explicación.

—No tengo más remedio. —Y al pronunciar estas palabras no habría sabido decir si en ese momento le era leal o no a Kate. En cierto modo, la traicionaba porque dejaba entrever su plan. Sin embargo, notó que Milly se lo tomaba como la simple expresión de la verdad. Estaba esperando lo que le había contado Kate: el permiso de Lancaster Gate para volver a Inglaterra. Si quería conservar la amistad de la tía o la sobrina no podía moverse sin él. Densher lo entendió por la manera en que Milly interpretó el sentido de su respuesta y tuvo la sensación de estar mintiendo, así que se vio obligado a pensar en algo para enmendarlo. Lo que se le ocurrió un instante después fue:

—¿Acaso no es suficiente que, dejando aparte otras obligaciones que pueda tener, me haya quedado por usted?

—¡Oh!, eso es usted quien debe juzgarlo.

Él estaba ya en pie a punto de despedirse, y también muy nervioso. Al menos sus palabras no habían

sido desleales con Kate: ése había sido precisamente el tono de su acuerdo. También eran, al ser leales, otro tipo de mentira, la mentira de la falsa pretensión de un motivo. No sólo no se había quedado por Milly, sino que, en cierto modo, se había quedado contra ella. De todos modos no lo sabía y, en último extremo, por suerte, no le importaba. Lo único que acertó a decir podía ser tanto para bien como para mal.

—Pues, como no me voy, ¡ya ve lo que juzgo!

II

No volvió a casa después de marcharse: no le apeteció; estuvo, en cambio, deambulando por los estrechos callejones y los *campi* con arcos góticos hasta llegar a un café pequeño y relativamente apartado donde más de una vez había buscado refugio y tranquilidad, aparte de soluciones que desembocaban principal y agradablemente en nuevas indecisiones. Es cierto que las que le aguardaban esa noche, cuando se arrellanó en el asiento de terciopelo con la cabeza apoyada en un espejo florido y la mirada perdida entre las volutas del tabaco, tal vez le pareciesen un poco menos imprecisas que de costumbre. Y no porque antes de volver a ponerse en pie hubiese comprendido lo que debía hacer, sino porque la prueba que acababa de pasar le obligó a aceptar su situación. Cuando, media hora antes, en el palacio, había cambiado de idea a propósito de algo que le parecía tan sumamente imposible, allí mismo y ante los ojos de la joven, había actuado movido por la súbita impresión de ver mucho más allá, de reparar en lo poco, o nada, que importaban las imposibilidades. No era pedantería: a la gente en la situación de Milly todo le estaba permitido. Y esa situación pasó a ser también la suya, como activada de pronto por un resorte, cuando entendió lo mucho que la joven dependía de él. Cualquier cosa que él hiciese o dejase de hacer tendría una íntima relación con su vida, que quedaba completamente en sus manos y no volvería a tener relación con ninguna otra cosa. Estaba escrito que él podría matarla: así interpretó su destino sentado en su rincón de costumbre. El temor que le causó una idea semejante le impulsó a pasar por alto todo lo demás y lo dejó paralizado más de tres horas. En ese rato pidió más consumiciones y fumó más cigarrillos que nunca. Lo que acababa de entender le inspiró al principio un intenso terror: cualquier gesto, bueno o malo —suponiendo que siguiera habiendo alguna diferencia— recibía un vívido «¡Chitón!» que lo silenciaba en ese mismo instante. De hecho, mientras duró su vigilia, consideró varias formas de ponerse en movimiento y fue como aprender a andar de puntillas.

La conclusión que sacó cuando por fin se aventuró a dejar el local fue la certeza de que de cualquier otra manera iría directo a la destrucción. Una destrucción representada por la idea de empujar a Milly a tomar cualquier decisión. Cualquier cosa conseguida de ese modo no podía ser más que una catástrofe. Se había mezclado con el destino de la joven, o, mejor dicho, su destino se había mezclado con él, de tal modo que un simple movimiento en falso podía quebrar el hilo. Es cierto que esas consideraciones le ayudaron a reencontrar cierta paz, pues su luminosa conclusión implicaba que no debía hacer nada, lo cual encajaba después de todo con la carga que Kate le había echado encima. Lo único que tenía que hacer era no dar un paso sin el permiso de Milly, no moverse, ni adelante ni atrás, extrañamente, sin su permiso o sin el de Kate. A eso se reducía su astucia: a la necesidad, una vez más, de limitarse a ser amable. Eso equivalía a quedarse quieto… a considerar cómo causar el mínimo de vibraciones. Mientras fumaba se sintió como si estuviese encerrado en una sala en cuyas paredes hubiesen colgado precariamente algún objeto. Un paso en falso y se caería, y debía colgar el mayor tiempo posible. Comprendió, al volver a ponerse en marcha, que ni siquiera Fleet Street podría alcanzarle en esas circunstancias. Su director podía telegrafiarle diciendo que le necesitaban, pero él haría oídos sordos. No necesitaría mucho dinero para llevar esa vida ociosa; por suerte, en cualquier caso, Venecia era barata, y no había que olvidar el hecho peculiar de que Milly en cierto modo le mantenía. En realidad, el mayor de sus gastos era ir al palacio a cenar. No quería, en suma, renunciar a eso y probablemente podría contenerse y no moverse apenas.

Lo intentó tres semanas, y pronto tuvo la sensación de no haber fracasado. Debía estar recurriendo a artes muy sutiles pues no se esforzaba —más bien al contrario— en ser aburrido ni distante. Eso no habría sido ser «amable», que en cierto modo era su verdadera norma. Y también podría haber causado la vibración que deseaba evitar; de modo que lo mejor era no dudar, ni tener miedo, por así decirlo, de dejarse llevar… dejarse llevar en el sentido de quedarse, queremos decir. Dependía de adónde fuese; que era a lo que se refería con lo de tener cuidado. Cuando uno iba de puntillas podía batirse en retirada sin que se

notase. Un tacto exquisito —cuya necesidad, como sabemos, había reconocido felizmente desde el primer momento— serviría para mantener cualquier relación entre ellos sobre la base de lo que ambos daban por sentado. Daban por sentado, por ejemplo, que la suya era una amistad indisoluble y que el hecho de que ella fuese una joven norteamericana era, en ese momento, y para la relación en la que estaban implicados, un regalo inapreciable. O, al menos, si, a medida que iban pasando los días, ella no aprovechaba las prerrogativas de la idiosincrasia nacional y las ventajas de su juvenil recato, si no deseaba y no se esforzaba por hacerlas valer con entusiasmo y anticipación, no sería porque Densher no se lo recordase: no sería, en suma, porque no la animara a hacerlo. Tal vez no le hablase con elocuencia del asunto en sí mismo como algo a lo que no le convenía renunciar; pero le hablaba con franqueza de una forma que a él le gustaba considerar impersonal, y así contribuía a recordárselo, puesto que también tenía cuidado en hablar de manera agradable. A fin de cuentas, la idea se les había ocurrido a ambos y era lo más conveniente para facilitar su relación. Era tan elástica que podía estirarse de manera casi infinita; y, sin estirar, seguía dentro de unos límites apropiados. Y a la vez Densher tenía la sensación, por suerte sin confundirse demasiado, de que, por su parte, la joven actuaba con la más extraña y consciente sumisión y hacía en gran parte lo que él quería, aunque no supiese muy bien por qué. Una vez incluso sacó a relucir la cuestión al decir: «¡Ah, sí!, a usted le gusta que seamos como somos porque, en cierto modo, le resulta más fácil que no precisemos: ¡para eso tendría una que ser inglesa!». Y, extrañamente, lo hizo sin menoscabo de su bondad. Es posible que pensara que estaba haciendo —es decir, siendo— lo que él quería sólo para ver a dónde los llevaría. A medida que transcurría el tiempo, cada uno veía el juego del otro: ella sabía que él se esforzaba por conservarla como quería, y él sabía que ella lo sabía. Añádase que él sabía que ella sabía, pero que eso no estropeaba nada, y tendremos una idea aproximada de la forma de comportarse que ambos consideraban totalmente factible. Lo más raro para nosotros debe ser que el éxito así conseguido era precisamente lo que, agradecido, él consideraba más fuera de su alcance —más fuera del alcance de Kate— y lo que garantizaba el decoro diario. Difícilmente habrían podido ser felices —por falta del lubricante adecuado— si la idiosincrasia nacional así invocada no hubiese estado en sintonía con Milly de una manera tan inescrutable como total. Constituía su unidad y era lo único que él podía dar siempre por sentado.

Así lo hizo, a diario, veinte días, sin que se acrecentase su temor de causar esa vibración indebida que le tenía en guardia. Sabía en su nerviosismo que, en el mejor de los casos, estaba viviendo al día; sin embargo, creía no haber cometido ninguna equivocación. Todas las mujeres tenían cambios de humor, y Milly con más razón; pero en ella el carácter nacional era firme: ya fuese en parte o, como en esa época, totalmente; un carácter nacional que, en una mujer todavía tan joven, convertía el aire respirado en un elemento no conductor. No fue hasta cierta ocasión, pasados esos veinte días, cuando, al ir al palacio a tomar el té, se enteró de que la *signorina padrona* no «recibía». La noticia le esperaba en el patio, de labios de uno de los gondoleros, que se la dio con el azoramiento que no podía sino causarle su evidente libertad de acceso. Densher, en el palazzo Leporelli, no era de los invitados a los que sencillamente se recibía, sino que había ocupado un lugar entre los íntimos y los allegados, por lo que ante un rechazo tan flagrante juzgó conveniente insistir. Por lo visto, ninguna de las dos damas recibía, y no obstante Pasquale no sabía si alguna estaba *poco bene*. Aunque tampoco sabía que estuviesen de ninguna manera, y podría habérsele tildado de inexpresivo, anotó mentalmente Densher, si el término pudiera aplicarse a los miembros de una raza en la que la inexpresividad era un cúmulo de oscuridad: no una vana superficie, sino un lugar en el que refugiarse y donde habitaba indistinguible algo turbio y siempre ominoso. En ese momento volvió a notar la fuerza del veto que pendía en el palacio respecto a cualquier alusión, cualquier reconocimiento, de las aflicciones de su dueña. El estado de su salud nunca se esgrimía como motivo. Hasta qué punto sabían la verdad era otra cuestión, de la que fue aún más consciente después de insistir. Apeló a su amigo Eugenio, a quien mandó llamar de inmediato, con quien departió tres largos minutos, a resguardo de la lluvia, en la galería que conducía hasta el patio desde los escalones que daban al canal, y a quien siempre llamaba para sus adentros su amigo, pues estaba seguro de que, si hubiese estado en su mano, habría puesto elegantemente fin a sus visitas. Eso producía una relación que requería su propio nombre, una auténtica intimidad de conciencias: una intimidad de la vista, el oído y todo menos la lengua. En otras palabras, era más que evidente para nuestro joven que en aquellas cinco semanas Eugenio había llegado a tener de él un concepto menos elegante que vulgar, sin que pudiera hacer nada por impedirlo. Volvió a notarlo en el aire entre ambos mientras Eugenio le aguardaba en el patio.

Esa mañana temprano el tiempo se había vuelto tormentoso, la primera borrasca marina del otoño, y Densher le había hecho bajar casi con malevolencia por la imponente escalinata exterior, el principal adorno del patio, al *piano nobile* de Milly. Lo hizo para desquitarse —al ver su oportunidad— de todas sus imputaciones, y sobre todo de la imputación de que, inteligente, *tanto bello* y nada rico, el joven londinense

iba —de manera evidente— tras la fortuna de la señorita Theale. También quiso desquitarse por haberle dado a entender sutilmente que un caballero debe considerar al criado más devoto de la joven señorita (apenas interesado por esa atracción) un apéndice insignificante, si espera que le ayude a lograr la impunidad y la prosperidad. A Densher esas insinuaciones le parecían odiosas por la sencilla razón de que podían haber sido ciertas tratándose de un hombre inferior, y sólo tres cosas le habían impedido ponerle en su sitio. Una era que quien así le censuraba se expresaba siempre con una corrección impersonal y claramente inhumana; la segunda, que uno no puede actuar contra los refinamientos de expresión del criado de una amiga; y la tercera, que el que le atribuyera esos motivos no le causaba mayor perjuicio. No era culpa suya si la opinión vulgar, la opinión que podía haber adoptado un hombre de rango inferior, encajaba con él de forma tan exacta. Por lo visto no era tan distinto de los hombres de rango inferior. Por eso, en suma, consideraba a Eugenio su «amigo», porque sabía bien lo que pensaba, y lo que le dio a entender en ese sentido a lo largo de la conversación aún fue mucho más allá. Densher comprendió que, sin duda, al expresar su descontento con la respuesta del gondolero, ratificaba la imagen que tenía de él; y, sin embargo, lo notó sólo en la distancia aumentada y exaltada que se había establecido en ese momento entre los dos. Eugenio, por supuesto, sabía que una palabra de sus labios podría costarle su puesto; pero también que, mientras no la pronunciara —y había tomado precauciones para que fuese imposible que lo hiciese— podía regodearse en la idea de estar montando guardia. Densher reparó en que nunca había montado una guardia tan férrea como en esos minutos en la *loggia* húmeda, donde las tormentosas rachas de viento eran más fuertes; y, debido a su presencia, nuestro joven tuvo la sensación súbita y aguda de que todo se había echado a perder. Había ocurrido algo: no sabía qué y no sería Eugenio quien se lo diría. Lo que sí admitió, sin entrar en más detalles, fue que tenía entendido que las dos damas —como si la amenaza que pendía sobre ambas fuese idéntica— estaban «un poco» fatigadas, sólo «un poquito, poquito». Era uno de los indicios por los que Densher notaba que, gracias a una profundidad y unos recursos ciertamente diabólicos, le respondía siempre en inglés si le hablaba en italiano y en italiano si le hablaba en inglés. Como de costumbre, sonrió ligeramente al hablar, con unos modales que el joven comprendió que estaban en armonía con lo que quiera que hubiese producido la ruptura de la paz.

De ese modo, el largo minuto que pasaron enfrentados a lo que ambos callaban, desempeñó también su papel en el súbito resquebrajamiento de la seguridad de Densher. A los dos se les reveló una Venecia perversa y, si hubiesen podido entenderse, habrían sentido idéntica angustia; una Venecia que les azotaba con una lluvia fría desde un cielo bajo y negro, en la que un viento ominoso aullaba en los callejones, en la que todo estaba parado e interrumpido y en la que quienes se ganaban la vida en los canales aguardaban acurrucados sin nada que hacer, aburridos y cínicos, debajo de los puentes y los soportales. El mudo intercambio de nuestro joven con su amigo estuvo tan cargado de alusiones que, si la presión se hubiese prolongado un poco más, los dos habrían acabado exhaustos. En realidad, lo que ambos pensaban habría disipado sus mutuas sospechas y probablemente los habría unido más que distanciado. Pero para Densher fue un momento que nada habría podido reparar; ni siquiera la corrección formal con que su interlocutor lo acompañó al *portone* y se inclinó al despedirle. No se había hablado de su posible regreso, y el aire había actuado como un elemento incapaz de transmitir los mensajes. Densher sabía, por supuesto, que lo que echaba de menos no era la invitación de Eugenio a volver; pero al mismo tiempo sabía que lo que le había sucedido era parte de su castigo. En la plaza, más allá de la *fondamenta*[48] que daba acceso al palacio, donde el viento soplaba con más fuerza, se encorvó aún más bajo el paraguas. Y no sólo porque comprendiese la vulgaridad —por otro lado, invisible para los demás— de tener que aceptar, por una concatenación de circunstancias, cosas como que una persona especialmente astuta, a quien no podía descartar sin más como un granuja interesado, tuviese de él una opinión que no podía atacar, desacreditar y (eso era lo peor) ni siquiera tener en cuenta. A qué extremos había llegado si le importaba tanto la opinión de un criado. La de Eugenio le habría importado incluso si, fundada en una rastrera interpretación de las apariencias, hubiese estado equivocada. Y le parecía tanto más desagradable en cuanto que su interpretación de las apariencias era exacta y no por eso menos rastrera.

Fuese como fuere, en cualquier caso, Densher procuró quitárselo de la cabeza con impaciencia pues tenía otras cosas de las que preocuparse. A pesar del tiempo tuvo que ir andando y se dirigió por tortuosas callejas a la piazza, para refugiarse en sus soportales. Allí, bajo las altas arcadas, se apiñaba media Venecia, mientras en el Molo[49] al otro extremo de la plaza, las antiguas columnas de san Teodoro y del León formaban el marco de una puerta abierta de par en par a la tempestad. Al pasar por allí le extrañó ver las cosas tan cambiadas… sólo porque, por primera vez, le hubieran negado la entrada en el palacio. Había otros motivos, pero todos se reducían a ése: era la nota discordante que había roto el hechizo. Ahora tendría que enfrentarse a la humedad y al frío, y fue como si hubiese presenciado de pronto la destrucción del

margen de confianza en el que todos vivían. Así era como llamaba a algo que, aunque hasta entonces había resistido, no podía soportar el menor golpe. El golpe, en cierta manera, había llegado, y estuvo pensándolo con sorpresa mientras se abría paso entre otros transeúntes tan indecisos como él y paseaba la vista sin verlas por las bagatelas de las tiendas. Había partes de la galería empavesadas con losas de mármol rojo, sucias ahora por la sal y las salpicaduras; y todo el lugar, con su enorme elegancia, la gracia de su diseño y la belleza de su detalle, parecía más que nunca un gran salón, el salón de Europa, profanado y violado por un giro adverso de la fortuna. Se rozaba con hombres atezados a los que el sombrero calado y las mangas anchas de la chaqueta daban un aire de melancólicos enmascarados. Las mesas y las sillas que se desbordaban de los cafés se apretujaban, como si todavía ofreciesen sus servicios, en los soportales, y aquí y allá un alemán con gafas con el cuello del abrigo levantado consumía públicamente su comida y su filosofía. Densher iba recogiendo todas esas impresiones, pero dio tres veces la vuelta a la plaza antes de pararse en seco, enfrente del Florian[50] por la más intensa de todas. Sus ojos habían reparado en un rostro en el café: había visto a un conocido detrás del cristal. La persona, a quien tuvo tiempo de ver con calma, estaba sentada, no muy lejos, a una mesita sobre la que había aún un vaso, medio vacío y evidentemente olvidado; y aunque tenía sobre la rodilla un ejemplar de un periódico francés —se veía el encabezamiento de *Le Figaro*— estaba recostado y miraba la pared rococó que tenía enfrente. Densher lo tuvo un minuto de perfil, tiempo suficiente para que su identidad produjera, aunque fuese a toda prisa, las asociaciones necesarias: asociaciones directas y sorprendentes; y luego, como si fuera lo más necesario, captase la mirada, gracias a un giro de la cabeza, que podría haber sido producto de la sensación de estar siendo observado. Esa vista más amplia reveló la imagen completa de lord Mark: lord Mark tal como lo había encontrado, varias semanas antes, el día que ambos fueron por primera vez al palazzo Leporelli. Pues había sido lord Mark al completo al que había visto salir en aquella ocasión, cuando él entraba: se había dado cuenta, en su momento, en el propio vestíbulo; por eso, al volver a verlo, apenas hicieron falta unos segundos para que la misma magnitud potencial saliera a la superficie.

Todo el incidente fue cuestión de —a lo sumo— unos pocos segundos; pues, como no podía quedarse allí mirándolo y lord Mark tampoco podía saludarle, enseguida reemprendió su camino a un paso muy distinto. Fue como si en esa pausa hubiese comprendido la respuesta al misterio del día. Lord Mark le había mirado —igual que lo había mirado él al principio, antes de reconocerle— como a uno más entre la empapada muchedumbre. El reconocimiento, aunque disimulado, se había producido después; pero la certeza no se había traducido en un impulso de saludarle. Su relación había sido lo bastante breve para que ninguno de los dos quisiera reanudarla. Lo importante, no obstante, no era que no lo hiciesen, sino que el caballero del Florian estuviera en Venecia. No podía llevar allí mucho tiempo. En caso contrario, Densher, que frecuentaba aquel gran lugar de encuentro, lo habría visto. Lord Mark hacía visitas cortas; estaba a punto de reemprender el vuelo; en ese momento debía de estar pensando ya en su tren o en su barco. Había vuelto por algún motivo, consecuencia de su visita anterior; y cualquiera que fuese su propósito había tenido tiempo de llevarlo a cabo. Tal vez hubiese llegado la noche anterior o esa misma mañana; pero ya había conseguido su objetivo. Para Densher fue muy importante conseguir esa respuesta. Se aferró a ella, la acarició, la arropó mientras seguía su camino. Le impulsó a andar y andar, sin que eso mitigara lo más mínimo su nerviosismo, pero al menos le proporcionó la explicación que buscaba, lo cual era mucho pues con explicaciones podría intentar defenderse. Por otro lado, aquel aire malsano se parecía mucho al hálito del destino. El viento había cambiado, la lluvia era horrible, el viento perverso, el mar espantoso, por culpa de lord Mark. Él era, *a fortiori*[51] la causa de que se le hubiesen cerrado las puertas del palacio. Densher dio otras dos vueltas a la plaza y en cada ocasión volvió a encontrar al visitante tal como lo había visto la primera ocasión. Es decir, una vez estaba mirando al frente; la siguiente, hojeando el ejemplar de *Le Figaro* que había abierto. Densher no se detuvo, sino que lo dejó en apariencia inconsciente de su presencia y, cuando volvió a pasar, lord Mark había desaparecido. Sólo había estado allí un día; se marcharía por la noche; había ido al hotel a ultimar los preparativos. Densher lo vio tan claro como si se lo hubiesen dicho con palabras. La oscuridad se había despejado, o eso pensó… Quedaba algo, lo principal, que no acertaba a entender; pero entendía tan bien todo lo demás que casi venía a ser lo mismo. Había visto a un hombre que había hecho lo que había ido a hacer, y para quien de momento era suficiente con eso. El hombre había vuelto a ver a Milly, y Milly le había recibido. Su visita debía de haberse producido justo antes o justo después del almuerzo y era la razón de que él hubiera encontrado las puertas cerradas.

Esa noche se dijo, y se lo repitió al día siguiente, que sólo necesitaba un motivo, y que cuando lo tuviese podría, según sus palabras, seguir con lo suyo. Como sabemos, había decidido que lo suyo era no moverse; y se preguntó por qué eso iba a impedirle sentirse totalmente libre de culpa respecto a esa crisis. Concedió a las apariencias el beneficio de ser críticas, para no tener que reprocharse haberlas pasado por alto si la

sensación de culpa aumentaba. Pero él ni siquiera había visto a la joven ese día y, si estaba enfadada, no era por nada que él hubiese hecho. Poder pensarlo instaló a Densher en una especie de regocijo. Regocijo que se vio aumentado además, por las condiciones —sorprendentes, peliagudas, desagradables para él— del regreso de lord Mark. Que siguiera opinando lo mismo las horas siguientes, que fueron muchas, le pareció claramente siniestro, a pesar de su propia ignorancia. No necesitaba, para ver que era malo, para ver que era ciertamente «desagradable», saber más que lo que había comprendido tan fácilmente. No podía uno caer así sobre la pobre chica sin ser brutal. Una visita así era una embestida, una invasión, una agresión: constituía precisamente uno de esos choques estúpidos que con tanto decoro había procurado evitarle él. De hecho, a la mañana siguiente, Densher llegó a la conclusión —y la habría expresado con franqueza de haber tenido ocasión— de que la única forma delicada y honorable de tratar a una persona en ese estado era hacer como había hecho él. Con el tiempo, en realidad, pues la impresión no hizo sino aumentar, esa sensación de contraste, tan favorable para Merton Densher, se convirtió en una sensación de alivio, y en su momento en una sensación de escapatoria. Fue, en todos los sentidos —y soltó un largo suspiro de alivio—, como si se hubiese librado de un peligro excepcional. Lord Mark lo había conjurado, sin tener la menor intención de prestarle aquel servicio. El muy animal había tenido una inspiración equivocada y había proporcionado a la persona a quien había querido perjudicar una impunidad que era una especie de inocencia, casi una purificación. La persona a la que había querido perjudicar no podía ser otra que la que rondaba tan inexplicablemente el palacio. Y, de momento, para esa persona, seguir el camino que se había trazado equivalía a no moverse; así que, después de mucho pensarlo, concluyó que lo mejor era no volver al palacio en uno o dos días.

Pasaron uno o dos días, y luego tres; con el extraordinario efecto de que Densher se sintió en ese tiempo aún más limpio y purificado. Para que su regreso fuese más eficaz debía esperar un indicio favorable; y en cualquier caso, mientras duraba su ausencia, no sentía el menor remordimiento. Ninguna de las dos mujeres podía desear que volviera sólo para enfrentarse a Eugenio. Que volviesen a negarle la entrada era inconcebible, pues habría sido como admitir que era responsable de algo y responsable era justo lo que no era. La ausencia no le causaba remordimientos porque, desde el momento en que no le dejaban entrar, lo único que podía enviar era un recado expresando sus esperanzas de que estuviesen mejor de salud. Como tenía vedada cualquier alusión parecida, no le quedaba otra opción que esperar, lo cual le resultaba más fácil porque cada día que pasaba se sentía más justificado. Los días en sí mismos no fueron precisamente apacibles: el viento y el mal tiempo continuaron, el frío con el hogar apagado presagiaba lo peor; el hechizo roto del mundo que le rodeaba se quebró en piezas más pequeñas. Iba y venía por su cuarto y escuchaba el viento… También prestaba atención por si oía alguna campanilla y esperaba por si llegaba algún criado del palacio. Tal vez le enviasen una nota, pero la nota no llegaba; pasaba horas en casa para no perdérsela. Cuando no estaba en casa salía a dar un paseo igual que el día en que vio a lord Mark. Deambulaba por la plaza con la multitud de refugiados, observaba los alrededores y se asomaba a los cafés por si el animal, como lo llamaba ahora, pudiera estar aún en Venecia. Sabía que si se había quedado solo podía ser porque le estaban recibiendo y no había que pensar mucho para comprender que eso habría sido un auténtico descalabro. Pero se había ido: estaba demostrado, aunque el cuidado que Densher ponía en dilucidarlo ponía en evidencia los aspectos más amargos de la dura prueba que estaba pasando. Todo se reducía a lo que estaba haciendo por Milly: pasar unos días que ni el alivio ni la escapatoria podrían purgar de su carácter abyecto. ¿Cómo no iba a ser abyecto que un hombre como él se viese reducido a semejantes pasatiempos? ¿Qué podía haber más sórdido que pasear bajo la lluvia y tener que asomarse a las tiendas en previsión de posibles encuentros? ¿Qué podía ser más odioso que tener que preguntarse por las consecuencias de un posible encuentro con aquel hombre? Había momentos en los que, a pesar de todo, no se sentía mucho más recto que el otro hombre. Y, sin embargo, al tercer día, pese a que seguía sin tener noticias, comprendió mejor que nunca que no se habría movido por nada del mundo.

Pensó en las dos mujeres, en su silencio, y en todo caso en Milly, que, probablemente, tendría sus razones para desear fervientemente que se fuera. El aliento frío de sus razones flotaba, junto con todo lo demás, en el aire; pero le importaron tan poco como el deseo en sí mismo, y decidió quedarse a pesar de ella, a pesar de su odio, a pesar tal vez de alguna vivencia definitiva que sería casi insoportable. Sería la manera de, purificado como estaba, demostrar su virtud más allá de toda duda. Aceptaría lo desagradable, y lo desagradable sería una prueba: una prueba de que no se había quedado, por así decirlo, por eso tan agradable que había dicho Kate. Lo que había dicho Kate no consistía en nada tan odioso como quedarse a pesar de todas las insinuaciones. Y también era odioso que Kate, por comodidad, estuviera tan lejos. Fue la primera vez desde su huida en que acertó a calificar lo que ella había hecho por él la víspera de ese acontecimiento. Era raro, tal vez vil, pensar tan pronto en esas cosas; pero una de las revelaciones que tuvo

en su soledad fue que ella había actuado según su propia conveniencia. Se había marchado y lo había metido de lleno a él en el ajo; y la diferencia aumentaba a medida que crecía su preocupación. En la última ocasión que tuvieron de intercambiar unas palabras breves y restringidas, le había dicho en un tono profundo y tajante, distinto a cualquier otro que hubiese utilizado hasta entonces con él: «¿Cartas? Jamás… Ahora no. Piénsalo. Es imposible». De modo que, como entendió sus motivos —aunque, al mismo tiempo, percibió en ellos una extraña incoherencia—, en la práctica su entendimiento se interrumpió junto con su correspondencia. Además, al perderla, había hecho justicia a la ley del silencio que le había impuesto; pues sin duda era más delicado no escribirle que escribirle con las palabras con las que habría tenido que hacerlo si hubiese querido hablarle de ellos dos. Eso habría supuesto una turbia tensión y la idea de ella había sido ser noble, lo cual era en cierto modo una actitud que la dejaba, en ese momento crítico, relativamente libre. Y a él, en las mismas circunstancias, particularmente solo. Es decir, estuvo solo hasta que, la tarde del tercer día, justo al caer el sol, cuando empezaba otra vez a llover y su cuarto parecía, sin duda, más inhóspito que nunca, la sonriente *padrona* abrió la puerta e hizo pasar a la señora Stringham. Entonces se produjo un brusco cambio, sobre todo cuando reparó en lo apesadumbrada que estaba su visita. Dio la impresión de que era en parte porque su impermeable estaba empapado, porque dejó sin darse cuenta que la buena mujer se llevara su paraguas, y porque su rostro, debajo del velo, enrojecido por el fuerte viento, estaba —y el velo también— tan mojado como si la lluvia hubiese sido sus lágrimas.

III

Fueron al grano casi enseguida; después él se sorprendería de esa falta de preámbulos.

—Se pasa el día mirando la pared.

—¿Es que se ha puesto peor?

La pobre señora siguió donde se había quedado al entrar; Densher, con la súbita preocupación y curiosidad que se habían despertado en él al ver a la señora Stringham, había despedido con un gesto a la *padrona*, que se había ofrecido a llevarse su impermeable. Ella contempló vagamente la habitación a través del velo mojado, consciente del paso que había dado y deseando no haberse equivocado, pero incapaz de ver nada todavía.

—No lo sé… Por eso he venido a verle.

—No sabe cuánto me alegra —dijo él—, tengo la sensación de haberla estado esperando angustiado.

Ella alzó los ojos borrosos por las lágrimas y repitió sus palabras.

—¿Angustiado?

No obstante, ahora la palabra no salió de los labios de Densher. Habría sonado como una queja y, en comparación con lo que había notado que acongojaba a su visita, sus propios problemas carecían de importancia. Los de ella, bajo la ropa empapada —que hizo que le avergonzara no tener la chimenea encendida—, eran graves y tuvo la sensación de que los había llevado todos consigo. Respondió que había sido paciente y, sobre todo, que había preferido no moverse.

—Quieto como un ratón… Usted misma ha podido comprobarlo. Me he movido menos estos tres días que en toda mi vida. He juzgado que era lo más oportuno.

Notó que esa forma de definir su actitud como un remedio o una forma de prudencia le parecía bien a su amiga que vio en ella una luz a la que podía responder con la suya.

—Ha sido lo mejor. Me habría gustado tener noticias suyas. Pero ha sido lo mejor —repitió.

—Pero ¿no ha servido de nada?

—No lo sé. Temía que se hubiese ido usted. —Luego, mientras él movía la cabeza de manera lenta pero muy madura, añadió—: ¿No estará pensando en marcharse?

—¿Es no moverse —preguntó— lo mismo que marcharse?

—¡Oh!, digo que si se quedará usted por mí.

—Haré cualquier cosa por usted. ¿Acaso no es la única por la que puedo hacer algo?

Ella se quedó pensando y Densher notó todavía con mayor claridad el alivio que le estaba dispensando. Su presencia, su rostro, su voz, el cuarto destartalado, tan pobre y al mismo tiempo tan recargado, donde admirablemente Kate había ido a visitarle: todo contaba para ella, que lo tomó como la ayuda que tanta falta le había hecho y se limitó a contemplarlo sin más. No obstante, al mismo tiempo, la embargó un característico remordimiento de conciencia. El suyo era un disfrute casi personal, que dijo mucho a Densher de los tres días que a su vez había pasado ella.

—Bueno, cualquier cosa que haga usted por mí… será también por ella, ¡sólo que… sólo que…!

—¿Sólo que ahora ya nada tiene importancia?

Ella lo miró un minuto como si estuviese ante la personificación de esas palabras.

—Entonces ¿lo sabe?

—¿Se está muriendo? —preguntó él como toda respuesta.

La señora Stringham esperó… a juzgar por la expresión de su rostro fue como si le estuviese sondeando. Luego su respuesta fue extraña.

—Ni siquiera le ha nombrado a usted. No hemos hablado.

—¿En tres días?

—No más —prosiguió— que si todo hubiese concluido. Ni siquiera una leve alusión.

—¡Ah! —dijo Densher un poco más animado—, ¿dice usted a mí?

—Y ¿a quién iba a ser si no? No más que si hubiese usted muerto.

—Bueno —respondió al cabo de momento—. Es que he muerto.

—Entonces yo también —dijo Susan Shepherd mientras metía los brazos debajo del impermeable.

El tono con que lo dijo se impuso por su cruda desesperación; representaba en aquel cuarto inhóspito y sin otra vida que la que había dejado Kate —cuyo sentido, por otro lado, podía estar intuyendo por vías misteriosas su visitante— la impotencia misma ante la extinción. Y Densher no tenía ninguna respuesta, tan sólo repetir:

—¿Se está muriendo?

Y, como si esas palabras fuesen demasiado crudas, casi una punzada física, ella volvió a decir:

—Entonces ¿lo sabe?

—Sí —respondió por fin él—. Lo sé. Pero lo que me maravilla es que lo sepa usted. No tengo derecho a imaginar o suponer que así sea.

—Puede hacerlo —dijo Susan Shepherd—, en cualquier caso, lo sé.

—¿Todo?

Sus ojos siguieron presionándole a través del velo.

—No… no todo. Por eso he venido.

—¿Para que yo se lo diga? —Al verla titubear, se conmovió y soltó un dubitativo «¡Ay, ay!». Apartó la mirada hacia la habitación, que era como una parte de él mismo, que era más que nunca la morada, el antiguo santuario del acontecimiento, convertido en vivo recuerdo, por el que lo había alquilado. Eso no podía decírselo, aunque Susan Shepherd era tan maravillosa que tal vez hubiese empezado a adivinarlo por un proceso que ya se había puesto en marcha. Vio conmovido que no había ido a juzgarlo; más bien, hasta donde Densher podía suponer, a compadecerle. Asistió así a su abatimiento: o, al menos, al abatimiento de su dolor; y comprendió con un arrebato de amistad que se sentía a gusto con ella. El arrebato se agudizó cuando ella respondió a su quejido con un bálsamo.

—En todo caso… si sirve de algo, estaremos juntos.

Densher reconoció en ella su propio impulso.

—Es lo que me he atrevido a sentir. Es mucho. —Ella le dio a entender, en efecto, silenciosamente, que sería lo que él quisiera; y Densher notó cómo se disipaban sus miedos, si es que los había tenido. El consuelo fue enorme, pues le devolvió algo precioso, que su mano, en el esfuerzo por recobrarlo, había aprehendido de forma imperfecta. Recordó que Kate le había dicho, con su incomparable audacia —y a propósito de cosas que él no había entendido en ese momento— que la señora Stringham era una persona que no pestañearía ante una dificultad. No era sino otro de esos casos en los que Kate prevalecía—. Entonces ¿no tiene usted una opinión demasiado horrible de mí?

Y la respuesta de la señora Stringham fue aún más inapreciable porque no la acompañó ninguna efusión nerviosa, como si comprendiera lo que probablemente habría creído él. Recapacitó y eso fue lo que le sirvió de más ayuda:

—¡Oh, ha sido usted extraordinario!

Un instante después reparó en que aún seguían allí de pie. Ella se quitó el impermeable con su ayuda, aunque después de que aceptara una silla y se quitase también el velo, Densher vio en los estragos sufridos que las palabras que acababa de decirle eran la única flor que podía ofrecerle. Eran el único consuelo que tenía para él, y además estaba sujeto a cómo se desarrollaran los acontecimientos. En todo caso se sentó a su lado bajo la luz gris, triste como el crepúsculo invernal, que había creado su reencuentro. La imagen que volvió a evocar aún pareció más sombría: «Se pasa el día mirando la pared».

La imaginó con gran viveza, y fue como si los dos guardaran silencio para que él pudiera contemplarla.

—¿No habla? No digo de mí.

—De nada… de nadie. —Y Susan Shepherd continuó contando las cosas tal como había tenido que aceptarlas—. No quiere morir. Piense en su edad. Piense en su bondad. Piense en su belleza. Piense en todo lo que es. Piense en todo lo que tiene. Se queda ahí muy rígida y se aferra a todo. ¡Así que doy gracias a Dios…! —concluyó la pobre señora con vana incoherencia.

Él se extrañó.

—¿Da gracias a Dios…?

—De que esté tan tranquila.

Él se extrañó aún más.

—¿Lo está?

—Más que eso. Está seria. Y nunca lo ha estado. Ya la ha visto usted… todos estos días. No puedo

contarle más… pero es mejor así. Me moriría si me lo dijese.

—¿Si se lo dijese? —Densher seguía desconcertado.

—Cómo se siente. Cómo se aferra. Que no quiere.

—¿Que no quiere morir? Pues claro que no. —Densher hizo una larga pausa, y tal vez ambos pensaran en si podrían hacer algo para impedirlo. No obstante, no fue eso lo que dijo. La «seriedad» de Milly y el gran palacio silencioso seguían estando presentes junto a la mujer menuda que tenía delante y que parecía estar esperando y escuchando—. Y ¿qué mal le ha hecho usted?

La señora Stringham miró confundida a su alrededor.

—No lo sé. He venido a hablar con usted de ella.

Él volvió a vacilar.

—¿Me odia tanto?

—No lo sé. ¿Cómo quiere que lo sepa? Nadie lo sabrá jamás.

—¿Es que no lo dirá?

—No.

Una vez más se quedó pensativo.

—Debe ser extraordinaria.

—Lo es.

Su amiga, después de todo, estaba allí para ayudarle, y él lo aprovechó en la medida de lo posible.

—¿Querrá volver a verme?

Su interlocutora lo miró admirada.

—¿Querría verla usted?

—¿Tal y como la describe? —Notó su sorpresa, y tardó un poco en responder—. No.

—Pues ¡ya ve! —suspiró la señora Stringham.

—Pero, si ella pudiera soportarlo, ¡haría lo que estuviese en mi mano!

Por un momento, pareció considerarlo, pero enseguida desistió.

—No veo qué podría hacer usted.

—Yo tampoco. Pero puede que ella sí.

La señora Stringham siguió pensando.

—Es demasiado tarde.

—¿Demasiado tarde para que ella vea…?

—Demasiado tarde.

El mismo convencimiento de su desesperanza —después de todo tan lúcida— avivó su impaciencia.

—Pero ¿qué dice el médico…?

—¿Tacchini? ¡Oh!, es muy amable. Va a verla. Se siente muy orgulloso de contar con la ayuda y la aprobación de un gran especialista londinense. La verdad es que está siempre allí, no sé qué habrá sido de sus otros pacientes. Además, la considera, y con razón, un gran personaje; y la trata como si fuese un miembro de la familia real; espera los acontecimientos. Pero ella apenas consiente verlo, y, aunque, le ha dicho, generosamente —por mi causa, pobre criatura— que puede ir, que puede quedarse, por mí, pasa la mayor parte del tiempo pululando delante de su puerta, merodeando por las habitaciones, intentando entretenerme, en ese salón espantoso, con los cotilleos venecianos, y esperándome en los umbrales, en la sala, en las escaleras, con una sonrisa agradable e insoportable. No hablamos —añadió Susan Shepherd— de ella.

—¿Por petición expresa de Milly?

—Desde luego. No hago nada que ella no quiera. Hablamos del precio de la comida.

—¿También se lo pidió ella?

—Desde luego. Me lo sugirió cuando me dijo, la primera vez, que si iba a serme de consuelo el médico podía quedarse cuanto quisiera.

Densher la escuchó.

—Pero ¡no le sirve del menor consuelo!

—No. Pero eso —añadió— no es culpa suya. No hay consuelo posible.

—Desde luego —observó Densher—. Y tengo la horrible sensación de que yo tampoco lo soy.

—No. Pero no he venido por eso.

—Ha venido por mí.

—Digámoslo así. —Pero lo miró con los ojos rebosantes de lágrimas, y un momento después surgió algo aún más profundo—. Por supuesto, en el fondo he venido…

—En el fondo ha venido por nuestra amiga. Pero, si como dice, es demasiado tarde para que yo pueda

hacer nada…

Ella siguió mirándole visiblemente irritada por la verdad.

—Eso he dicho. Pero, ya que está aquí —y, extrañamente, volvió a recorrer el cuarto con la mirada—, ya que está aquí y en vista de todo lo demás… Creo que no debemos abandonarla.

—No lo quiera Dios.

—Entonces ¿no lo hará? —El tono de Densher la había hecho ruborizar.

—¿Por qué pregunta si lo haré, cuando es ella la que me ha abandonado? ¿Qué puedo hacer si se niega a verme?

—Pero acaba de decir que no le gustaría.

—Lo que he dicho es que no me gustaría verla tal y como la describe. No querría verla así. Pero claro que me gustaría, si puedo ayudarla. Aunque incluso en ese caso —continuó Densher sin demasiada fe— tendría que ser ella quien quisiera. Y ahí —concluyó— está lo malo. En que no quiere. ¡No puede!

Impaciente, se había puesto en pie, y ella lo observó moverse con impotencia.

—Hay una cosa que puede hacer. Sólo una, y no será fácil. Pero algo es algo. —Él se plantó ante la señora Stringham con las manos en los bolsillos y enseguida leyó en sus ojos lo que se le venía encima. Ella hizo una pausa como si aguardase su permiso para hablar, y como Densher la hizo esperar se quedaron oyendo en el silencio el renovado aguacero en el canal. Por fin habló, pero en voz baja, como si siguiera atemorizada—. Creo que usted ya sabe en qué consiste.

Lo sabía y, aun así, como había dicho ella, y ¡con razón!, había dificultades. Se apartó de ellas, de todo, por un instante; fue a la otra ventana y contempló el canal amortajado, más ancho, como un río, y las casas de enfrente que, borrosas y empequeñecidas, parecían estar al doble de distancia. La señora Stringham no dijo nada, de hecho se quedó muda un minuto, como si lo hubiera «pillado», y él fue el primero en volver a hablar. No obstante, no respondió directamente a su última observación, sino que la utilizó como pretexto. Volvió con ella y dijo:

—Permítame, ya sabe, ver… uno tiene que entender… —casi como si hubiese aceptado de momento. Lo que quería saber era dónde, a propósito de la esencia de la cuestión, estaba la voz de *sir* Luke Strett. Si hablaban de no abandonarla, ¿no debería ser él el menos dispuesto a hacerlo?—. ¿No estamos, en el peor de los casos, actuando a ciegas sin *sir* Luke?

—¡Oh! —dijo la señora Stringham—, es él quien me infunde ánimos. Le telegrafié la primera noche, y respondió como un ángel. Vendrá cuanto antes. Aunque, como muy pronto, llegará el jueves por la tarde.

—Bueno, ya es algo.

Ella se quedó pensando.

—Algo… sí. Ella le aprecia.

—¡Desde luego! Todavía recuerdo su expresión, cuando estuvo aquí en octubre, la noche en que ella iba de blanco, y llevó al palacio a unos invitados y a aquellos músicos, y me lo presentó. Fue muy agradable. Milly me pidió que le enseñara el palacio; así lo hice, y nos entendimos de maravilla. Lo que demuestra —dijo Densher con una sonrisa breve y triste— que ella le tenía aprecio.

—Él también le tenía aprecio a usted —se aventuró a decir Susan Shepherd.

—¡Ah, eso ya no lo tengo tan claro!

—Pues debería tenerlo. Lo acompañó usted a las galerías y a las iglesias; le ahorró tiempo, le enseñó las cosas más interesantes, y tal vez recuerde que usted mismo me dijo que, de no haber sido un gran cirujano, podría haber sido un gran juez. De lo que es hermoso, digo.

—Bueno —admitió el joven— es lo que es… desde el momento en que la ha juzgado. Si la ha juzgado —prosiguió— no ha sido por nada. Su interés por ella, que debemos aprovechar al máximo, sólo puede ser enormemente beneficioso.

Seguía yendo y viniendo por la habitación con las manos en los bolsillos mientras hablaba, y ella vio, tal como revelaron sus ojos, que el joven estaba intentando mantenerse a distancia de lo que había medio confesado unos minutos antes.

—Me alegro —dijo— de que le sea a usted simpático.

Él debió de notar algo en su tono.

—Bueno, no más que a usted, mi querida señora. Seguro que a usted también le es simpático. No cabe duda de que, cuando estuvo aquí, todos llegamos a apreciarle.

—Sí, pero tengo la sensación de saber lo que opina. Y me atrevería a decir que, con todo el tiempo que pasó con él, también debería saberlo usted —añadió.

Densher se detuvo en seco, aunque no dijo nada al principio.

—Nunca hablamos de Milly. Ninguno de los dos aludió a ella, ni siquiera pronunciamos su nombre o

dijimos nada al respecto.

La señora Stringham lo miró sorprendida por esa imagen. Pero claramente tenía una idea a la que se aferró un instante después.

—Sería por discreción profesional.

—Exacto. Pero también por mi impresión de esa virtud, y además había otra cosa. —Y exclamó con súbita vehemencia—: ¡No podía hablar de ella con él!

—¡Oh! —dijo Susan Shepherd.

—No puedo hablar de ella con nadie.

—Sólo conmigo —continuó su amiga.

—Sólo con usted. —La sombra de una sonrisa, un atisbo de entendimiento, había acompañado sus palabras y eso le obligó, por honradez, a no apartar la vista de ella. También por honradez —es decir, por sus propias palabras— se sonrojó: había ocultado, de golpe, la carga de sus conversaciones con Kate. Y, cuando sus miradas se cruzaron, fue como si su visitante le hubiese visto ocultarla. No le quedó más remedio y el esfuerzo fue lo que le hizo ruborizarse. No podía sacarlo a relucir ahora; al menos de momento. Ella podría malinterpretarlo. Intentó repetir su afirmación, pero en realidad la modificó—: *Sir* Luke, en cualquier caso, no tenía nada que decirme, y yo tampoco a él. Nos era imposible disimular y…

—… y la realidad —le interrumpió ella con enorme vehemencia—, aún era más imposible. Sin duda… —Densher no lo negó; y ella sacó enseguida sus propias conclusiones—. Eso prueba lo que digo… que entre ustedes dos mediaba un abismo. De lo contrario, habrían conversado.

—Me atrevería a decir —admitió Densher— que ambos estábamos pensando en ella.

—Ni usted ni él podían pensar en otra cosa. Por eso siguieron juntos.

En fin, si insistía, también estaba dispuesto a admitirlo; pero volvió a lo que había dicho al principio.

—En cualquier caso, no tengo ni idea de cuál pueda ser su opinión.

Ella lo enfrentó, visiblemente, a la pregunta a la que, según había notado, volvía siempre con su peculiar seriedad en uno u otro sentido.

—¿Está usted totalmente seguro? —Y él sólo pudo reparar en lo distintos que eran en apariencia.

—Entiendo que, según usted, opina que está desahuciada.

Ella no se inmutó.

—Lo que yo crea no tiene importancia.

—Bueno, ya veremos… —y tuvo la sensación de ser casi superficial. En esos cinco minutos había comprendido cada vez con más claridad que la señora Stringham tenía algo que decirle, y nunca había tenido tantas ganas de posponer la ocasión. Habría querido retrasarlo todo hasta el jueves; lamentaba que fuese martes, se preguntaba si sería miedo. Pero no de *sir* Luke, que llegaría pronto; ni de Milly, que se estaba muriendo; ni de la señora Stringham, que seguía allí sentada. Tampoco, por raro que pareciese, de Kate, pues de pronto tuvo la sensación de que su presencia se había desvanecido o desdibujado. La de Susan Shepherd, al prolongarse, había ejercido cierta influencia bajo la que había dejado de actuar. Estaba tan ausente para sus sentidos, ausente igual que un eco o una alusión, como lo había estado desde su partida del palacio; y fue la primera vez que, entre los objetos que lo rodeaban, sus sentidos repararon en ella. Comprendió entonces que era de sí mismo de quien tenía miedo, y que, si no iba con cuidado, llegaría a tener mucho más—. Entretanto —añadió, dirigiéndose a su compañera—, me ha alegrado muchísimo verla a usted.

Ella se puso en pie despacio al oír sus palabras, que casi le habían dado a entender que prefería encargarse él. Se quedó allí como si de verdad pensara que quería echarla con brusquedad. Pero en este caso la brusquedad habría sido tan evidente que habría sido un motivo para insistir. Por otro lado, le dejó claro que, según creía, sólo necesitaría insistir uno o dos minutos más. Y, además, ya lo había dicho.

—¿Lo hará, si se lo pide? Digo si *sir* Luke se lo sugiere. Y ¿le dará usted —¡ay, entonces que se puso seria!— la oportunidad de hacerlo?

—La oportunidad de sugerirme ¿qué?

—Que, si lo niega usted, eso podría servir de algo.

Densher notó cómo —al igual que le había ocurrido una vez ya en el último cuarto de hora— se ruborizaba hasta la raíz del cabello. No obstante, ruborizarse por vergüenza estaba, por así decirlo, descartado para él: en este caso, le pareció más bien un síntoma de su temor. Le mostró con claridad qué era lo que le asustaba.

—Si niego ¿qué?

La pregunta hizo revivir las dudas de la señora Stringham, ¿acaso no le había dado a entender todo ese tiempo que lo sabía?

—Pues lo que lord Mark le contó a Milly.

—Y ¿qué le contó lord Mark a Milly?

La señora Stringham pareció desconcertada, pues todo le pareció de pronto perverso.

—Pensaba que lo sabía.

Y le llegó el turno de ruborizarse.

Eso aumentó la compasión que le inspiraba, pero Densher estaba demasiado preocupado por otras cosas.

—Entonces sabe usted…

—¿Lo de su aciaga visita? —Le miró fijamente—. Pero ¡si ha sido la causa de todo!

—Sí… eso lo entiendo. Pero también sabe…

Volvió a titubear, sin embargo ella estaba más que dispuesta a decir todo lo que sabía.

—Hablo —dijo con voz calmosa— de lo que le contó. Es lo que he dado por descontado que usted sabía.

—¡Ah! —exclamó él a su pesar.

Un momento después, vio que para ella parecía ser un alivio, como si hubiese supuesto que estaba pensando en otra cosa. Y entonces lo entendió.

—¡Ah, ha pensado que yo lo sabía porque era cierto!

Su comprensión había aumentado el rubor de la señora Stringham y Densher supo que se había traicionado. No es que tuviera mayor importancia, como vio aún con mayor claridad. Por fin había salido todo a relucir, ya no podía posponerlo más. Se quedaron con la idea que ella quería que admitiese. Diez minutos antes, él había expresado su necesidad de entender y, al fin y al cabo, era lo único que ella quería. Pero lo que tenía que entender no era una cuestión baladí; podía ser más grave incluso de lo que parecía.

Densher volvió a pasearse por el cuarto, sin responder a lo que ella le había dicho; estuvo un minuto asomado a la ventana, mirando las musarañas, como habría dicho él; y, por supuesto, ella vio que lo había puesto contra las cuerdas. Lo vio con claridad; y su sensación de haberlo «pillado» se convirtió enseguida en un escrúpulo, que formuló sin ánimo de presionarle.

—Lo que digo es que le contó a Milly que ha estado usted comprometido todo el tiempo con la señorita Croy.

Él se volvió con una sacudida; por el ruido, fue casi como un latigazo; y, como un idiota, tal como comprendió después, respondió lo primero que se le pasó por la cabeza:

—Que he estado todo el tiempo ¿qué?

—¡Oh!, no lo digo yo —respondió ella con mucha dulzura—. Sólo digo lo que le contó él.

Densher, que se había dejado llevar por la impaciencia, se había contenido ya.

—Perdone mi brutalidad. Por supuesto, sé a qué se refiere. Lo vi, por la tarde —siguió explicándole—, en la piazza; sólo un instante, en el Florian, a través de la ventana, sin que llegásemos a cruzar palabra. De hecho, apenas lo conozco: no hemos tenido ocasión. Sólo nos hemos visto una vez, además… debió de irse esa misma noche. Aunque supe que no había venido por nada, y le he estado dando vueltas a cuál podía ser el motivo de su visita.

¡Oh!, la señora Stringham también lo había hecho.

—Vino por exasperación.

Densher se mostró de acuerdo.

—Vino para decirle que sabe mejor que ella por quién lo rechazó hace unos meses cuando estaba en las nubes.

—¿Cómo lo sabe? —y la señora Stringham casi sonrió.

—Lo sé… lo que no sé es qué bien puede reportarle a él.

—Él cree que, si tiene paciencia, no demasiada, ese bien no tardará en llegar. No sabe lo que le ha hecho. Sólo nosotros lo sabemos.

Él comprendió, pero siguió desconcertado.

—¿Le ocultó ella… lo que sentía?

—Estoy segura de que se las arregló para que no se le notara. Él asestó el golpe y ella lo encajó sin inmutarse. —Estaba claro que la señora Stringham era sincera, y lo que contaba volvió a empujarla a repetir su apreciación—: Es extraordinaria.

Densher, una vez más asintió solemnemente.

—¡Extraordinaria!

—Y él —prosiguió la señora Stringham— es un completo idiota.

—Un completo idiota. —Se miraron un momento al considerar su fatídica estupidez—. Y, sin embargo, tiene fama de ser muy inteligente.

—Mucho… hasta la propia Maud Lowder lo cree. Y en Londres fue muy amable conmigo —dijo la

señora Stringham—. Casi me da lástima: tiene la conciencia tan tranquila…

—Inevitablemente, como todos los imbéciles.

—Sí, pero, por lo que me contó ella, supe desde el principio que no le deseaba ningún mal a Milly.

—Así actúan siempre los imbéciles —replicó Densher—. Por supuesto, sólo me lo deseaba a mí.

—Y, de paso, pensaba mejorar su propia situación… creía que así lo lograría. No había podido digerir —prosiguió la señora Stringham— lo ocurrido en su visita anterior. Lo había humillado demasiado.

—Ya lo vi.

—Sí, y él le vio a usted. Vio que le recibían, por así decirlo, cuando a él lo echaban.

—Desde luego —dijo Densher—. Ahora lo entiendo. Y luego ha sabido por qué me recibían. Varias semanas. No le faltaban motivos para preocuparse.

—Exacto… fue más de lo que podía soportar. Aunque aún los tiene —respondió la señora Stringham.

—Sin embargo, al final —preguntó Densher, que a su vez estaba teniendo mucho más de lo que preocuparse que hasta entonces—, al final, ¿cómo ha llegado a saberlo? A saber lo suficiente, digo.

—¿A qué llama usted suficiente? —preguntó la señora Stringham.

—Sólo puede haber actuado, sería su única garantía, con pleno conocimiento.

Había seguido hablando sin hacer caso a su pregunta, pero aun así los dos creyeron entenderse y, al cabo de un instante, ella insistió:

—¿A qué se refiere con pleno conocimiento?

Densher respondió de manera indirecta.

—¿Dónde ha estado desde octubre?

—Creo que volvió a Inglaterra. De hecho, tengo razones para creer que vino directamente desde allí.

—¿Directo a cumplir con su misión? ¿Todo ese viaje por sólo media hora?

—Bueno, para volver a probar suerte… tal vez con la ayuda de algún hecho nuevo. Puede que para reconciliarse con ella… un intento distinto del otro. En cualquier caso, tenía algo que decirle, y no sabía que su oportunidad se reduciría a media hora. O quizá media hora fuese precisamente lo más eficaz. ¡Lo ha sido! —dijo Susan Shepherd.

Su compañera sabía lo que se decía; pero, mientras le aclaraba la cuestión más de lo que él había osado hacer, poniendo los puntos sobre numerosas íes, Densher veía multiplicarse las preguntas. Hasta entonces habían estado juntas en un montón, confusas y enmarañadas; y ahora se aislaban y se mostraban por separado. La primera que le planteó fue más bien brusca.

—¿Ha tenido noticias últimamente de la señora Lowder?

—¡Oh, sí!, dos o tres veces. Como es natural, quiere tener noticias de Milly.

Él dudó.

—Y ¿quiere, como es natural, tener noticias mías?

Su amiga consideró la pregunta un instante.

—No le he hablado más que para bien. Ésta habrá sido la primera.

—¿Ésta? —Densher estaba pensativo.

—Lo de la visita de lord Mark, y que ella está como está.

Densher siguió pensando un rato más.

—¿Qué le ha contado la señora Lowder de él? ¿Ha ido a verlas?

—Sólo lo ha citado una vez… en su penúltima carta. Entonces sí que dijo algo.

—¿Qué?

La señora Stringham hizo un esfuerzo para seguir hablando.

—Bueno, fue a propósito de la señorita Croy. Que creía que Kate estaba pensando en él. O más bien que él estaba pensando en ella… sólo que en esta ocasión Maud tenía la impresión de que tenía el camino más fácil.

Densher la escuchó sin apartar la vista del suelo, pero enseguida la levantó para hablar, y su rostro puso de manifiesto que era consciente de que su siguiente pregunta podía parecer extraña.

—¿Quiere decir con eso que le ha animado a pedir la mano de su sobrina?

—No sé lo que quiere decir.

—Pues claro que no… —procuró dominarse— y yo no debería insistirle para que llegue a una conclusión a la que yo mismo no puedo llegar. Aunque, tengo para mí —añadió— que sí puedo.

Ella se atrevió a decir con cierta timidez:

—Creo que yo también.

Era una de las cosas que —y así lo revelaba su rostro— desde el momento en que entró en aquel cuarto parecía haberle dado a entender la enorme sensibilidad de la señora Stringham en lo que a él se refería. Se

habían despedido cuatro días antes con muchos sobreentendidos, pero ahora todo había aflorado a la agitada superficie, y no era él quien lo había sacado a relucir tan deprisa. Las mujeres eran maravillosas… o al menos ésta lo era. Aunque no lo eran menos Milly y la tía Maud; por no hablar, sobre todo, de Kate. En fin, ya sabía los sentimientos que le inspiraba aquel círculo de enaguas. Y ¡menudas enaguas! En eso consistía la belleza de aquel enredo en que se había metido. Una sensación que, por su parte, y también para nosotros, tal vez fuese el motivo de que volviera a plantear otra pregunta a su visita y pasase por alto su observación.

—Y ¿ha escrito la señorita Croy a nuestra amiga?

—¡Ah —le corrigió la señora Stringham—, también es amiga suya! Pero, que yo sepa, no le ha escrito ni una palabra.

Había dado por seguro que así era, lo cual no era mucho más extraño que el hecho de que él, con Milly, en seis semanas, no hubiese aludido nunca a la joven. Ni, ya puestos, mucho más extraño que el hecho de que Milly tampoco hubiera aludido a ella. A pesar de lo cual, y por incoherente que pareciese, volvió a ruborizarse ante el silencio de Kate. Procuró olvidarlo y para eso volvió un minuto al hombre al que habían estado juzgando.

—¿Cómo se las arregló para llegar hasta ella? Después de lo sucedido entre los dos, Milly podía haber respondido que no quería verle.

—¡Oh!, estaba de buen humor. Se hallaba más predispuesta —explicó la buena señora con un leve azoramiento— que la vez anterior.

—¿Predispuesta?

—No estaba en guardia. La situación era distinta.

—Sí. Pero no tanto.

—Lo justo para que no necesitara mostrarse tan arisca. Así es. Podía permitirse ser todo lo contrario. —Y, como Densher no dijo nada, completó con impaciencia lo que quería decir—. Llevaba seis semanas con usted.

—¡Ah! —gimió él en voz baja.

—Además, diría que lord Mark debió de escribirle antes… en un tono que le allanase el camino. Como pidiéndole que tuviese una deferencia con él. Y, una vez en su presencia…

—Una vez en su presencia —estalló Densher—, ¿se quitó la máscara? ¡El muy animal!

Susan Shepherd empalideció un poco y, como para aferrarse a una última esperanza, lo miró con más intensidad.

—¡Oh!, se marchó sin el menor remordimiento.

—Y también sin la menor esperanza.

—¡Ah, eso seguro!

—Entonces fue una vulgar venganza. ¿Acaso no la conocía —preguntó el joven—, no la había visto unas semanas antes, no la había juzgado, no intuyó que no le quedaban, para responder a una proposición como la suya, más que unos pocos meses de vida?

Al principio, la señora Stringham lo miró en silencio como toda respuesta; y eso dio más fuerza a lo que dijo después:

—Sin duda sabía todo eso que dice, exactamente igual que usted.

—¿Insinúa que sólo la quería porque…?

—Sólo por eso —respondió Susan Shepherd.

—¡El muy rastrero! —exclamó Merton Densher.

Se apartó, no obstante, acalorado, nada más hablar, consciente una vez más de cierta intencionalidad en la discreción de su visitante. El crepúsculo se había vuelto más oscuro; después de consultar una vez más con la desolación de fuera se volvió hacia su compañera.

—¿Quiere que encienda una luz: una lámpara o las velas?

—Por mí, no.

—¿Nada?

—Por mí, no.

Esperó un instante más al lado de la ventana y luego se dirigió a su amiga con una idea.

—Habrá pedido la mano de la señorita Croy. Eso es lo que ha pasado.

La discreción de la señora Stringham continuó.

—Eso júzguelo usted.

—Lo estoy juzgando. La señora Lowder también lo habrá intentado… pero, pobrecilla, equivocadamente. El rechazo de la señorita Croy —continuó especulando Densher— le habrá parecido a

lord Mark un fenómeno que necesitaba una explicación.

—Y ¿ha visto con total claridad que la explicación era usted?

—No con total claridad; puesto que me he quedado y dado que eso ha bastado para impulsarle a venir a ver a la señorita Theale. Pero sí con la claridad suficiente. Ha creído —dijo Densher valerosamente— que yo podía ser una razón en Lancaster Gate, y al mismo tiempo estar tramando algo en Venecia.

La señora Stringham, a su vez, hizo acopio de valor.

—¿«Tramando» algo? ¿Qué?

—Dios sabe. Alguna «jugada», como suele decirse. Alguna mala pasada. Alguna duplicidad.

—Lo cual, por supuesto —observó la señora Stringham—, es una suposición monstruosa.

Su compañero, al cabo de un tenso minuto —particularmente largo para ambos—, volvió a apartarse, y luego añadió otro minuto, que pasó, una vez más, mirando por la ventana con las manos en los bolsillos. Sabía muy bien que eso no era una respuesta a lo que ella había insinuado, e incluso pareció declarar que no había respuesta posible. Ella lo dejó tranquilo, y se alegró de haber declinado proseguir la conversación con una luz encendida. Habría sido una ventaja tan sólo para ella. Aunque también se benefició de su ausencia. Se notó en el tono con que le habló por fin —tan diferente ahora por la confianza— y repitió lo mismo que le había dicho antes:

—Si *sir* Luke le pide que haga algo por él, ¿negará usted ante Milly lo que tan horriblemente le han hecho creer?

¡Ay, cómo sabía que se acobardaría! Aun así, dijo por fin:

—¿Está totalmente segura de que ella lo cree?

—¿Segura? —apeló a todas sus circunstancias—. ¡Júzguelo usted mismo!

Densher volvió a tomarse su tiempo para juzgarlo.

—¿Lo cree usted?

Era consciente de estar presionándola mucho; le alivió un poco pensar que su respuesta debía de resultarle penosa a su discreción. Respondió, pese a todo, y resultó ser él el más presionado.

—Lo que yo crea dependerá más o menos de su forma de actuar. Puede usted arreglarlo perfectamente… si quiere. Prometo creerle si, para salvar la vida de Milly, consiente usted en negarlo.

—Pero negar —¡qué demonios, parece que no se dé cuenta!—, exactamente ¿qué?

Fue como si esperara que ella se amilanase, pero de hecho se creció.

—Todo.

Todo nunca le había parecido tanto ni tan incalculable.

—¡Oh! —se quejó sin más mirando hacia la oscuridad.

IV

La proximidad del jueves, que estaba cada vez más cerca y traería a *sir* Luke Strett, trajo también felizmente la disminución de otros pesares. El tiempo cambió, la obstinada tormenta pasó, y el sol del otoño, tantos días frustrado, pero ahora caliente y casi vengativo, volvió a campar a sus anchas y tomó posesión con un himno de alegría casi audible, una sufusión de brillantes sones que se unió al brillante colorido. Venecia volvía a relucir, a chapotear, a gritar y a tañer; el aire sonaba como una palmada y los rosas, los amarillos, los azules, los verdemares desperdigados por doquier parecían colgaduras de vivos colores, igual que una muestra de delicadas alfombras. Densher se regocijó de todo eso al ir a buscar al eminente médico a la estación. Acudió allí después de mucho pensarlo, consciente de que era la única manera de actuar dadas las circunstancias. A eso le habían empujado los acontecimientos: hasta donde nada lo había empujado antes. Sin duda, desde su nacimiento había pensado mucho más que actuado; aunque recordaba haber pensado cosas —unas pocas— que, en el momento en que se le ocurrieron, le habían emocionado casi tanto como si fuesen verdaderas aventuras. Sin embargo, nunca había conocido nada parecido a su estado actual, en el que tenía prohibido cualquier impulso, accidente o azar… en el que tenía prohibida, en suma, la libertad. Lo más raro era que si, a su llegada, unas pocas semanas antes, había tenido la sensación de estar viviendo una aventura, nada lo parecía menos que el hecho de haberse quedado. Una aventura sería marcharse, partir, regresar, ante todo, a Londres, y decirle a Kate Croy que había vuelto; pero había un no sé qué de vulgar, casi de rastrero y de obligado en seguir como estaba. Éste fue el peculiar efecto de la visita de la señora Stringham, que le había dejado con el regusto de lo que no podía hacer. Se lo había dejado muy claro, y al mismo tiempo lo había privado de la sensación, de la otra sensación, de lo que, como refugio, sí podía hacer.

Sabía que ir a la estación a buscar a *sir* Luke no era más que un pequeño simulacro de libertad. Pero, en todo caso, hacía tiempo que no sopesaba con tanto cuidado un acto libre. ¿En qué consistía entonces su odiosa situación sino en que estaba todo el tiempo atemorizado? Aquel peso lo paralizaba como un impuesto exigido por un tirano. Nunca se había planteado vivir lo bastante para que el miedo fuese una sensación predominante en su vida. Pero eso era lo que ocurría. Temía, por ejemplo, que un avance de su distinguido amigo pudiera suponer para él una obligación o un compromiso. Lo temía como a una corriente que pudiera llevarlo demasiado lejos; pero también consideraba con idéntica aversión ser vil, ser pobre, por culpa del miedo. Lo que prevaleció por fin fue la reflexión de que, pasara lo que pasase, el gran hombre había exhibido con él, después de aquella ocasión en el palacio en que la joven hizo un breve sacrificio a la vida social —y que la visita de la señora Stringham había vuelto a sacar a la superficie— una marcada benevolencia. Los comentarios de la señora Stringham sobre la relación que les había obligado a establecer Milly le hizo sentir —de manera inconfundible— cosas en las que tal vez no habría reparado. Con ese ánimo de tener la ocasión de volver a sentir de manera adecuada lo que fuera que se hubiese perdido; con ese ánimo, que representaba una escapatoria hacia la libertad, deambuló Densher, que había llegado temprano, por el andén antes de la llegada del tren. Sólo que, después de que llegase y él se dirigiera a la puerta del compartimento de *sir* Luke, todo lo que siguió, y el modo en que se desarrollaron los acontecimientos, la sensación de anticlímax, después de tantas tensiones, privaron a sus dudas y aprensiones incluso de la poca dignidad a la que podían aspirar. No supo si la actitud del visitante reflejaba menos que se acordaba de él y contaba con verlo allí, o su sorpresa al verle.

Sir Luke había olvidado por completo —o eso le pareció a Densher— a aquel joven tan interesante con quien se había paseado la vez anterior, aunque lo reconoció al instante, con una larga y tranquila mirada. El joven lo notó y le pareció la prueba de un maravilloso sentido de la economía. Comparada con los excesos a los que se enfrentaba, aquella exhibición era de tal naturaleza que podía ser un noble ejemplo para él. El eminente peregrino, en el tren, por el camino, había aprovechado el tiempo como mejor le había parecido,

sin pensar por un momento en lo que le esperaba al llegar. Le esperaba un caso exquisito, en el que, curiosamente, el joven interesante ocupaba un lugar más bien secundario; pero la misma expresión de su rostro, esa expresión que alteró levemente su impasibilidad al ver a Densher en el andén, fue un primer indicio de reconocimiento. De todos modos, si lo había reprimido al salir de la estación Victoria, volvería a reprimirlo ahora, pasara lo que pasara. Entenderlo le dio la clave, en lo que a él respectaba, de su visita. Se le notaba, pensó nuestro amigo, todo lo que parecía aceptar, aunque sólo fuese porque no se tomaba la molestia de ocultarlo: lo que pasaba desapercibido era el uso que hacía para sus adentros. Densher empezó a preguntarse, ante las escaleras que daban al canal, qué uso haría de la anomalía de que tuviesen que separarse allí. Eugenio le había esperado a respetuosa distancia en el andén y, a un gesto suyo, la góndola del palacio acudió a su encuentro, con una mezcla de precipitación y dignidad, al verlos salir de la estación. A Densher no le importó lo más mínimo tener que rechazar un asiento en los blandos y negros cojines, al lado del invitado del palacio, en presencia de tres emisarios de Milly; sabía que tenía que dejar atrás esa susceptibilidad. Se limitó a esbozar una vaga sonrisa en los escalones y a dejar que aquellos idiotas lo viesen tan postergado como quisieran.

—Ya no voy por allí —dijo con un triste movimiento de cabeza.

—¡Ah! —respondió *sir* Luke y no le dio mayor importancia; así que Densher pensó que todo se había resuelto de una manera espléndida, con una inescrutabilidad tan inevitable como inconsciente. Su amigo ni siquiera pareció dar a entender que suponía que lo hacía por respeto en ese momento de crisis. No pareció darle mayor importancia a nada, después de que la clásica embarcación, obedeciendo al inimitable impulso que le dio Pasquale desde la popa, realizara la maniobra mediante la cual exhibió, por así decirlo, gracias a la negra y alta joroba de su *felze*[52] una espalda ciertamente elegante al alejarse. Densher se quedó mirando la góndola hasta que la perdió de vista y oyó a través del agua el grito de Pasquale cuando giró bruscamente hacia un canal lateral que iba directo al palacio. Él no tenía góndola; acostumbraba a no utilizarlas; y se alejó andando humildemente —porque en Venecia andar es ciertamente humilde—, aunque antes se quedó un rato, como transido, en el lugar donde se había despedido del invitado del palacio. Era raro, pero se vio más que nunca, de un modo que jamás habría imaginado, en presencia de la verdad más sincera acerca de Milly. De ningún modo podría haber imaginado la fuerza del cambio que se produjo desde el instante mismo —estaba en el aire cuando oyó el grito de Pasquale y vio desaparecer la embarcación— en que vio al personaje a quien habían llamado en ayuda de la joven. No sólo no se había interesado nunca por los detalles de su enfermedad —lo cual para él era como un bálsamo—; no sólo se había quedado, como todo el mundo, en el exterior de un círculo impenetrable, dentro del cual reinaba una especie de vaguedad carísima hecha de sonrisas y de silencios y de bellas ficciones y de acuerdos inestimables en medio de una enorme tensión; sino que comprendió que además había favorecido, como todo el mundo, un disimulo que permitía conservar las formas, la compasión y el generoso ideal de cada cual. Era una conspiración de silencio, como dice el tópico, en la que nadie había hecho una excepción, de tal manera que en el cuadro la mancha de la mortalidad, la sombra del dolor y del horror, no habían encontrado ninguna superficie de espíritu o de palabra dispuesta a reflejarlas. «¡El instinto estético de la humanidad…!» se había dicho nuestro joven más de una vez sin llegar a terminar la frase, pero volviendo a aludir al atentado al buen gusto que constituía que uno tuviese que ver. Así que todos habían estado en las nubes y habían expulsado de allí lo que hemos dicho como si fuese un animal peligroso. Lo que acababa de suceder era que todo lo que había estado aguardando a las puertas había cruzado el umbral en la figura de *sir* Luke Strett y en número suficiente para llenar todo el recinto. Los nervios de Densher, al igual que los latidos de su corazón, tomaron la medida del cambio antes de que se marchase de aquel lugar.

Hechos como el sufrimiento físico, el dolor incurable, las esperanzas cada vez más reducidas, se habían vuelto intensos de golpe, y así era como los sentiría a partir de ese momento. Lo que despejaba el ambiente, en suma, y hacía la visión no sólo posible sino inevitable, lo único por lo que aún podían sentirse agradecidos, eran las anchas espaldas de *sir* Luke, tras las que hasta cierto punto uno podía ocultarse. Los primeros días Densher no tuvo muy claro si volvería a ver alguna vez a su distinguido amigo. Sabía que en ningún caso podía volver al palacio y que su proscripción era pública por no haberse marchado de Venecia. ¡Lo habían visto demasiadas veces en la góndola Leporelli! Como, por otra parte, nada hacía suponer que estuviese destinado a encontrarse con *sir* Luke en la ciudad, donde éste no tendría ni tiempo ni ganas de pasear, no volverían a encontrarse a menos que, sorprendentemente, el gran hombre fuese a visitarle. Que lo hiciese, pensó además Densher, no dependería sólo de que la señora Stringham decidiera, por así decirlo, proponérselo. Dependería también —lo cual implicaba cierta diferencia para ella— de que lo intentase; y dependería sobre todo de lo que *sir* Luke decidiera hacer ante semejante propuesta. Densher, por su parte, tenía su propia opinión de la intensidad, por no hablar del tipo de respuesta, que podía esperarse de él.

Tenía su propia opinión de la capacidad de dicho personaje para entender siquiera dicha proposición. ¿Hasta qué punto estaría predispuesto, y qué importancia podía, en suma, atribuirle? En realidad, Densher se hacía todas esas preguntas para estar preparado para lo peor. No volvería a hablar con él a no ser que el gran hombre fuese a verle, y el único motivo para ir a verle era inconcebible. Así que no lo haría y, en consecuencia, debía abandonar toda esperanza.

No era, ni mucho menos, que Densher atribuyera esa violencia a cualquier posibilidad, pero era consciente de que no podía permitirse dejar escapar la menor ocasión. Lo más extraño del trance en que se hallaba era que, a pesar de tener tanto miedo de sí mismo, no temiera nada de *sir* Luke. Se aferraba a la impresión, basada en los otros momentos en que había disfrutado de su compañía, de que en cierta medida, sería indulgente con él. La verdad sobre Milly pesaba sobre sus hombros y resonaba en cada uno de sus pasos y, por el simple hecho de su presencia en Venecia, daba de momento, nombre y forma a todo lo que había allí; pero aún no se había asentado en su rostro, aquel rostro que con tanta franqueza había mirado a Densher la vez anterior. Su presencia, en aquella ocasión, no porque le hubiesen llamado, sino por un amistoso capricho de *sir* Luke, había tenido un carácter muy distinto; y, aunque nuestro joven no podía aspirar a recobrarlo, sí tenía la esperanza de reanudar aquellos lazos. No tenía intención, como se obligaba a repetir para sus adentros, de acapararle; pero lo cierto es que había algo que quería para sí. Algo —no se lo quitaba de la cabeza— que *sir* Luke le habría conseguido, si no hubiese sido imposible. Esos dos o tres días, en los que ni siquiera su sentimiento de la tensión que reinaba en el palacio le impidió creer que el destino se burlaba de él, fueron los peores. No recordaba haber estado tan desanimado. En situación precaria, sin libros, sin amigos, casi sin dinero, sólo podía esperar. Su principal sostén, de hecho, era su idea original, que no había olvidado, de esperar a tocar fondo. El destino inventaría, si le daba tiempo suficiente, algún horrible refinamiento. De momento, había inventado la desaparición de *sir* Luke. Cuando pasó el tercer día sin tener noticias, supo a qué atenerse. Cuando la señora Stringham fue a visitarle, él no le había dado ninguna respuesta que fortaleciera su fe, y el ultimátum que, según le había dicho, estaba aguardándole para cuando él estuviese preparado no llegaría a producirse, aunque sólo fuese porque no la había autorizado a responder en su nombre. Dios sabía que él no deseaba que se produjese.

Sin embargo, no fue ésta, nos apresuramos a declarar —y Densher pronto tuvo ocasión de comprobarlo —, la idea con que *sir* Luke se plantó por fin ante él. Pues al final fue a verle, justo cuando nuestro amigo había llegado a la triste conclusión de que no podría descuidar por más tiempo sus obligaciones londinenses. Cuatro o cinco días, sin contar los viajes, representaban un gran sacrificio —para una cabeza no coronada— por parte de una de las luminarias médicas más eminentes del mundo; así que en realidad cuando el personaje en cuestión, después de llamar al timbre, se presentó ante su puerta, a Densher le pareció una imagen tan cortante como un cuchillo. Resumía, de hecho, en una simple y terrible palabra, la magnitud —no quiso llamarlo de otro modo— del caso de Milly. Así que el gran hombre no se había ido, y eso expresaba un sometimiento tan grande a las enormes necesidades de la joven que algún efecto, alguna ayuda, alguna esperanza, formaban de manera flagrante parte de esa expresión. Para Densher fue, como si ante aquel desengaño, fuese consciente de diez cosas al mismo tiempo: la principal era que cabía la posibilidad de que, puesto que *sir* Luke seguía allí, Milly se hubiera salvado. Justo después, y con idéntica agudeza, llegó la sensación de que la crisis —que estaba claro que iba a prolongarse gracias a él— no tendría un desenlace tan sencillo. No sólo su visitante no había ido a hablar de Milly, sino que ni siquiera tenía intención de pronunciar su nombre; se había pasado por allí sólo para decirle que, en lo poco que quedaba de su visita, cuyo fin estaba ya a la vista, no debía esperar nada de eso. Su actitud era parecida a la de la vez anterior, y era lo que le había impulsado a ir a verle. Sólo se quedaría hasta el sábado, pero había varias cosas interesantes que le gustaría ver. Por esas cosas interesantes, por Venecia y por la ocasión de disfrutar de Venecia, de dar un par de paseos, como él dijo, había ido en busca de su joven amigo, lo cual produjo en éste, unas veinticuatro horas más tarde, una vez definido el caso, una reacción tan incongruente como beneficiosa.

De hecho, nada podía haber sido superficialmente más monstruoso —y Densher era muy consciente de ello— que el consuelo que encontró en ese breve período en la renuncia tácita a cualquier referencia al palacio, en no tener noticias ni pedirlas. En eso se tradujo la llegada de su visitante, incluso en los segundos de tensión que relacionaron su presencia allí, directa e intensamente, con el estado de Milly. Había ido a decirle que la había salvado; había ido, como la señora Stringham, a decirle cómo podría salvarse; había ido, pese a la señora Stringham, a decirle que estaba condenada: los distintos arrebatos de esperanza, de temor, simultáneos a pesar de su claridad, mezclaron su identidad en un vuelco del corazón que persistió aún después de concluidos. Sencillamente, obró maravillas para él, eso era innegable, que *sir* Luke fuese como él habría dicho, tan tranquilo.

El resultado fue una extrañísima conciencia como de una bendita calma después de la tormenta. Como sabemos, llevaba semanas esforzándose por estar superlativamente quieto, en soledad y en silencio; pero ahora le daba la impresión de que había sido un episodio febril. La verdadera quietud era esa particular forma de compañía. Pasearon, y charlaron, volvieron a contemplar cuadros y recobraron impresiones: *sir* Luke sabía muy bien lo que quería; frecuentó un poco a los vendedores de antigüedades; se sentó en Florian a descansar y a tomar bebidas suaves, bendijo sobre todo el magnífico tiempo, un baño de aire cálido, una exhibición de luz otoñal. Una o dos veces, mientras descansaban, el gran hombre cerró los ojos y los dejó así unos minutos mientras su compañero observaba su rostro, y reflexionaba sobre las horas que debía haber pasado sin dormir. Él en persona había estado despierto de noche con ella horas y horas; aunque eso había sido lo único que le había dicho y por lo visto sería lo más parecido que iba a hacer a una alusión. Lo más extraordinario era que Densher se lo tomaba como una prueba, contemplaba imperturbable la imagen que le sugería y al mismo tiempo podía dar rienda suelta a su liberación. La liberación era una experiencia en sí misma, y ahora supo por qué, a pesar de su soledad, a pesar de su locura, a pesar de todo, la había estado esperando. Se había quedado en su cuarto esperándola porque había adivinado que, si llegaba a producirse, tendría el poder de redimirlo. Se estaba redimiendo: lo estaban tratando del único modo que no agravaba su responsabilidad. Y lo bueno era que *sir* Luke le consolaba no mediante un método o gracias a un conocimiento íntimo, sino porque era un hombre de mundo y conocía la vida y la realidad. Las impresiones de un hombre, de otro hombre, despejaron el ambiente; y se preguntó quién, si hubiese podido escoger, habría podido ser más indicado que él. Era de trato fácil y amplio de miras y eso era una gran suerte; sabía lo que era importante y lo que no; distinguía entre lo esencial y lo accesorio; entre las razones justas y los remilgos injustos. De ese modo uno —cuando lo trataba o se relacionaba de algún modo con él — se ponía en sus manos, y no se sentía menos afectado por su compasión que por su severidad. Lo más extraordinario —a eso se reducía todo— era su manera, podríamos decir, de hacer que lo raro pareciese natural. De lo contrario, nada podría haber sido más extraño, entre ellos, que el distanciamiento de Densher con las pobres damas del palacio; nada podría haber superado la no menos llamativa anomalía de que el gran hombre se abstuviera de hacer la menor alusión al asunto. Igual que había hecho cuando se vieron en la estación, no le daba importancia a nada; y el resultado, habría dicho Densher, era que el trato con él se parecía al de un médico con su paciente. Uno aceptaba sus indicaciones como si se tomara una dosis de medicina, con la diferencia de que las indicaciones no eran desagradables.

Por eso podía uno confiar en su discreción tácita, por eso Densher confió en ella esos tres o cuatro días, y tan sólo sintió cierta curiosidad la víspera del sábado, ante el anunciado final de aquel episodio. Mientras esperaba, una vez más, en esa ocasión, el sábado por la mañana, el regreso de *sir* Luke a la estación, nuestro amigo tuvo que admitir que esa tranquilidad vicaria había disminuido, como resultado de la perspectiva de que estaba a punto de perder uno de sus apoyos. La dificultad estribaba en que, tal como se había establecido su relación, el apoyo requería la presencia personal de *sir* Luke. ¿Se iría sin dejar nada que lo sustituyera… y sin romper, tampoco, su silencio sobre los motivos de su misión? Densher sabía aún menos que a su llegada, y fue ciertamente prodigioso que, en un momento tan decisivo, como pudo comprobar enseguida, no revelase ni el más mínimo indicio de lo que había vivido esa semana. Lo que había estado haciendo demostraba un inmenso interés además de unos elevadísimos honorarios; sin embargo, cuando la góndola Leporelli volvió a acercarse, con cierto retraso, su compañero, observándolo desde las escaleras, estudió su rostro elegante e imperturbable tan inútilmente como siempre. Fue como una lección, impartida por la más alta autoridad, sobre lo que es relevante, por lo que su inexpresividad le pareció de pronto casi cruel, pues la juzgó compatible de un modo espantoso con que Milly hubiese dejado de existir. Y la tensión continuó después de que entraran directamente —pues el tiempo apremiaba— a la estación, donde Eugenio, que había llegado temprano, montaba guardia ante el compartimento que le había reservado. La tensión, aunque es probable que no durase más que un par de minutos ante la puerta del vagón, se prolongó tanto para los nervios de nuestro desdichado caballero que involuntariamente dirigió una larga mirada a Eugenio, que no obstante la recibió como sólo Eugenio habría podido hacerlo. *Sir* Luke concentró toda su atención en la debida colocación de sus numerosos efectos personales, con los que era muy puntilloso, y Densher se vio, hasta donde podía permitirlo el silencio, preguntando al representante del palacio. No se sintió humillado; como tampoco le humilló intuir que dicho personaje sabía exactamente lo poco que le estaba ayudando. En eso Eugenio se parecía a *sir* Luke, hasta donde podían compararse los hábitos extraordinarios de sus respectivos rostros. No obstante, después de que Densher obtuviera de él todo lo que su dueño le permitió, *sir* Luke terminó de colocar sus cosas y sacó la mano para despedirse. Primero la tendió sin decir nada; y, sólo al mirarlo a los ojos, reparó nuestro joven en que nunca le habían mirado con tanta profundidad. No era que *sir* Luke mirase unas veces de manera más intensa que otra; pero en esa ocasión sostuvo la mirada

más tiempo, y eso podía significar todo por su parte. Significaba, creyó Densher por espacio de diez segundos, que Milly Theale estaba muerta; así que lo que le dijo por fin le hizo dar un respingo.

—Volveré.

—Entonces ¿está mejor?

—Volveré dentro de un mes —repitió *sir* Luke sin responder a la pregunta. Le había soltado la mano a Densher, pero aun así siguió reteniéndolo—. Tengo un mensaje para usted de la señorita Theale —dijo como si no hubiesen hablado de ella—: Me ha encargado que le pida de su parte que vaya a verla.

La mirada de Densher delató la violencia con que había descartado su anterior suposición.

—¿Es ella quien lo pide?

Sir Luke estaba ya dentro del vagón, cuya puerta había cerrado el factor; pero volvió a hablarle desde la ventanilla, un poco inclinado, aunque sin asomarse.

—Me dijo que le gustaría y, como esperaba verle a usted aquí, le prometí que se lo haría saber.

Densher le escuchó desde el andén, pero sus palabras hicieron que se ruborizase igual que lo habían hecho las de la señora Stringham. Se quedó igual de desconcertado.

—¿Es que puede recibir…?

—Puede recibirle a usted.

—Y usted ¿va a volver…?

—¡Oh!, no me queda otro remedio. Ella no debe moverse. Tiene que quedarse. Yo vendré a verla.

—Ya veo, ya veo —dijo Densher, que ciertamente lo veía… veía el sentido de las palabras de su amigo y también veía más allá. Aquello que le había anunciado la señora Stringham, y a lo que él había esperado no tener que enfrentarse, había sucedido. *Sir* Luke había esperado hasta el final, pero ahí estaba, y la forma concisa e indeterminada en que se lo había dicho —en el tono de un hombre de mundo hablando con otro, convencido de que, después de lo sucedido, sabría entenderle— no era sino la forma característica de su encanto. Le estaba pidiendo a Densher que entendiera muchas cosas, y lo primordial era, sin duda, demostrarle que las había entendido—. Le estoy muy agradecido, iré hoy mismo —respondió, pero, entretanto, mientras se miraban, el tren se había puesto lentamente en movimiento. Sólo quedaba tiempo para una palabra más y el joven la escogió, entre otras veinte, con intensa concentración—. Entonces, ¿está mejor?

El rostro de *sir* Luke adoptó una expresión extraordinaria.

—Sí, está mejor.

Y siguió con la misma expresión al lado de la ventanilla a medida que el tren se alejaba. Fue lo más parecido a la alusión que hasta ese momento no habían hecho. Si era eso lo que había expresado su rostro, nunca rostro alguno tuvo que expresar tantas cosas, pensó Densher en el andén, mientras se preguntaba a qué abismo lo había empujado y se alejaba bajo la mirada imperturbable de Eugenio.

Libro X

I

—Entonces han pasado… ¿cuánto dices…? ¿Quince días…? ¿Sin que hayas dado señales de vida?

Eso le preguntó sin rodeos Kate en el crepúsculo de diciembre en Lancaster Gate, a propósito de los días transcurridos desde su regreso; aunque él comprendió a la perfección que Kate seguía siendo tan admirablemente fiel como siempre a su instinto —que era también un sistema— de no admitir la posibilidad de que nacieran entre ellos pequeños resentimientos, naderías que socavaran su confianza general. Que, por sí misma, la belleza renovada de esta fidelidad lo conmovería profundamente, si es que otra cosa, no menos vívida pero diferente, no lo había conmovido aún más. Al verla él reparó en lo que había supuesto su separación, y en que volvían a verse como personas cuyas aventuras, plagadas de exilios y peligros en el tiempo y el espacio, hubiesen sido de una peculiar extrañeza. Se preguntó si él le parecería a ella tan diferente como ella se lo había parecido enseguida a él; lo cual no era más que su manera de aceptar, con un estremecimiento, que —incluso a primera vista— nunca la había visto tan hermosa. Eso fue lo que a la luz del fuego y la lámpara que iluminaba su bienvenida a través de la niebla londinense, se le presentó como la flor de su diferencia; igual que esa misma diferencia, parte de la cual consistía en que parecía haber madurado más de lo que podían justificar un par de meses, era el fruto de su relación íntima. Si Kate estaba diferente, era porque habían elegido juntos que lo estuviese, y ella podía exhibirlo orgullosa como prueba de su sabiduría, de su éxito, de la realidad de lo que había ocurrido: de lo que, de hecho, seguía ocurriendo en el espíritu de los dos. Densher sabía muy bien que lo primero que tenía que explicar era que, a pesar de haber vuelto, no hubiese dicho nada en varios días; por eso había tranquilizado su conciencia escribiendo a la señora Lowder una nota que había conducido a la presente visita. Había escrito a la tía Maud porque le había parecido lo más respetuoso; y sin duda había sido notable que no hubiese tenido que hacer el menor esfuerzo para no escribir a Kate. Venecia quedaba ya tres semanas atrás… había viajado despacio; pero fue como si, incluso en Londres, tuviese que seguir plegándose a sus órdenes. Eso fue precisamente lo que le permitió, confiado en su firmeza, apelar a sus sentimientos dada la situación y explicar su prolongada discreción. Había ido a contárselo todo, si tenía ocasión; y, como estaba claro que su lento viaje, sus esperas, su demora en ponerse en contacto con ella habían ido a la par que su resolución, esa incoherencia no era en el fondo más que uno de los elementos de tanta intensidad. Estaba recopilando lo que tenía que contarle. Para eso hacía falta tiempo, y la prueba era que, tal como comprendió enseguida, no podría haberlo hecho antes de esa tarde. Lo había llevado todo consigo, hasta la última sílaba, y —como, de hecho, pudo comprobar— no le sería difícil encontrar en esa cantidad la primera razón para que Kate lo entendiera.

—Quince días, sí… El viernes se cumplieron quince días, pero, como ves, no he hecho más que atenerme a nuestro maravilloso sistema. —Así le fue fácil justificarse porque ella no podía alegar no darse cuenta. Su maravilloso sistema seguía estando muy claro para ella, y la prueba de que también lo estaba para él era precisamente lo que había tenido que preguntarle. Ni siquiera tuvo necesidad de poner los puntos sobre las íes, más allá de señalar que, como ella sin duda recordaría, su maravilloso sistema no permitía las transiciones rápidas—. No podía, ¿no crees?, regresar a toda prisa; y supongo que me he contenido instintivamente para reducir al mínimo, tanto por ti como por mí, cualquier apariencia de que me estaba precipitando. Así parece más decoroso. Pero sabía que lo entenderías.

Kate pareció entenderlo tan bien que casi le pidió que no insistiera, aunque al mismo tiempo Densher reparó en que lo miraba como si ese dominio de la diplomacia fuese para ella un claro indicio de la influencia que había ejercido sobre él. Le parecía tan avezado en salir de cualquier contingencia como, en Venecia, ella se lo había parecido a él. Densher sonrió mientras abogaba por una renovación paulatina y paso a paso, suave, podía decirse, y gradual; aunque —por mucha elegancia que debiera afectar— ella respondió a su sonrisa del mismo modo en que había respondido a su entrada cinco minutos antes. Su leve

solemnidad en ese momento —que no era exactamente solemnidad sino una conciencia llena de vida hasta el borde y que se esforzaba en no rebosar— no había moderado tanto su bienvenida como la presencia en la sala, un par de minutos, del criado que le había presentado y que estaba poniendo la mesa para el té.

La respuesta de la señora Lowder a la nota de Densher se había limitado a concretar la hora de su visita a las cinco en punto del domingo. Después Kate le había enviado un telegrama sin firma: «Ven el domingo antes del té; un cuarto de hora nos será útil»; así que había llegado escrupulosamente a las cinco menos veinte. Kate estaba sola en el salón y no se demoró en decirle que la tía Maud, tal como había previsto felizmente, estaría ese rato —no muy largo, pero precioso— entretenida con una vieja sirvienta, jubilada con una pensión, que había ido a visitarla y que hasta las cinco no regresaría a su casa de las afueras. Tendrían ese rato para ellos, en cuanto se marchara el criado, y hubo un momento en el que, a pesar de su maravilloso sistema, a pesar de la proscripción de precipitarse y de la conveniencia de ir paso a paso, les pareció un tiempo verdaderamente precioso. Y todo sin prejuicios —por eso resultaba tan noble— respecto a la noble contención de Kate y su hermoso dominio de sí misma. Si él tenía su discreción ella tenía sus modales perfectos, que constituían la esencia de su decoro. La señora Stringham, observó para concluir con el asunto de su demora, debía de haber escrito a la señora Lowder contándole su partida de Venecia; así que no era que hubiese querido engañarlas. Tenían que haberse enterado de que se había ido.

—Sí, lo sabíamos.

—Y ¿seguís teniendo noticias suyas?

—¿De la señora Stringham? Desde luego. Bueno, quien las tiene es la tía Maud.

—Entonces ¿tenéis noticias recientes?

Su rostro reflejó su sorpresa.

—De hace uno o dos días. ¿Tú no?

—No… no he vuelto a saber nada. —Entonces comprendió lo mucho que tenía que contarle—. No he recibido ninguna carta. Aunque estaba seguro de que la señora Lowder sí. —Tras lo cual añadió—: Entonces tú lo sabes, claro… —Esperó, por si traicionaba lo que sabía; pero tan sólo manifestó en silencio la sombra de una sorpresa que no pudo controlar. No tuvo más remedio que preguntarle lo que quería—. ¿Sigue viva la señorita Theale?

Al oírlo, Kate abrió mucho los ojos.

—¿No lo sabes?

—¿Cómo quieres que lo sepa, cariño, lejos de todo? —Y él también se quedó mirando al infinito como en busca de luz—. ¿Ha muerto? —Luego, al ver que ella no le quitaba los ojos de encima, movió la cabeza y susurró un extraño—: ¿Aún no?

El rostro de Kate dejó traslucir que habían aflorado varias preguntas a sus labios, pero la única que llegó a plantear fue:

—¿Es tan horrible?

—¿Que sea plenamente consciente de que se está muriendo y no pueda hacer nada? —Tuvo que pararse a pensarlo un momento—. Bueno, sí… ya que me lo preguntas, es horrible, para mí… hasta donde, antes de irme, tuve ocasión de presenciarlo. Pero no creo —prosiguió—, por más que lo intente, que pueda explicarte lo que fue, lo que es, para mí. Por eso puede que te haya dado la impresión —explicó— de abrigar la esperanza de que todo hubiese terminado.

Kate le escuchaba con la mayor atención, pero Densher comprendió que, respecto a lo de contárselo todo, se vería dividida entre su deseo y sus reticencias de oírlo; entre la curiosidad, que, como era natural, la consumía y el escrúpulo respetuoso ante el infortunio. Además, cuanto más le mirara —y nunca le había dado la impresión de observar su rostro con tanto interés— más difícil le resultaría optar por una u otra actitud. Sencillamente, acabaría imponiéndose un sentimiento, y dicho sentimiento no sería la impaciencia. Esta intuición fue aumentando en él, e incluso, llegó a pensar por un momento que, si iba demasiado lejos, ella soltaría un maravilloso: «¿Qué horrores me estás contando?». Sonaría —¿no se estaría exponiendo a eso él mismo?— como si renegase, por lástima, y casi por vergüenza, de todo lo que había ocurrido entre ellos en Venecia. No era que fuese a confesar ninguna responsabilidad, ni a dejar que la traicionaran la compunción o el horror; pero Densher percibió en el aire —sí— que no querría conocer los detalles, que se negaría a oírlos, y que, aunque él tuviese la generosidad de entenderla, ella preferiría que se abstuviese. No obstante, tenía muy claro que, aunque tuviera que abstenerse, sólo lo haría en la medida en que le conviniese. Algo en su interior se negaba a no poder ser libre con ella. Al fin y al cabo ella lo había sido con él tres meses antes. Ahora sólo lo era en el sentido de que le trataba con amabilidad.

—Creo —dijo con mucha consideración— que ha debido ser espantoso para ti.

No obstante, él no hizo caso de su observación; había otras cosas que quería aclarar.

—¿No hay otra posibilidad, por lo que sabes? De que viva, digo. —Y tuvo que volver a insistir, pues ella hablaba lo menos posible—: ¿Se está muriendo?

—Se está muriendo.

Le pareció extraño que Lancaster Gate pudiera aumentar sus certezas sobre Milly; pero, tratándose de Milly, ¿qué no era extraño? De hecho, nada lo era tanto como su propia conducta: la presente y la pasada. No podía sino hacer lo que debía:

—¿Ha vuelto —preguntó— *sir* Luke Strett con ella?

—Creo que sí.

—Entonces —dijo Densher—, es el fin.

Ella aceptó en silencio sus palabras y el significado que él quiso darles; pero al cabo de un minuto habló de manera diferente.

—No estarás enterado, a no ser tal vez que tú también lo hayas visto, de que la tía Maud fue a verle.

—¡Ah! —exclamó Densher, sin añadir nada.

—Para tener verdaderas noticias —añadió Kate al cabo de un instante.

—¿Las de la señora Stringham no le parecían verdaderas?

—Tal vez fuese a mí a quien no me lo parecían. El caso es que la tía Maud intentó volver a visitarle hace tres días y en su casa le dijeron que se había ido. Tengo entendido que partió hace unos días.

—Y ¿no habrá vuelto a estas alturas?

Kate movió la cabeza.

—Ayer envió a alguien a preguntar por él.

—Entonces no la dejará mientras siga con vida —recapacitó Densher—. Se quedará hasta el final. Es un hombre extraordinario.

—A mí me parece que la que es extraordinaria es ella.

Volvieron a mirarse; y, extrañamente, él sólo acertó a decir:

—¡Ay, si tú supieras…!

—Bueno, al fin y al cabo es mi amiga.

En cierto sentido, en vista de sus delicadas reticencias, era la respuesta que menos se esperaba; y, por un breve instante, avivó con su aliento la impresión que le producía siempre de que era capaz de adaptarse a cualquier cosa.

—Entiendo. Tú habrías estado segura. Estabas segura.

—Pues claro.

Volvió a hacerse una pausa, que, no obstante, Densher interrumpió enseguida.

—Si las noticias de la señora Stringham no te parecían «verdaderas», ¿qué opinas de las de lord Mark?

Ella no tenía ninguna opinión.

—¿Las de lord Mark?

—¿No le has visto?

—No desde que fue a verla.

—Entonces ¿sabes que la vio?

—Claro. Por la señora Stringham.

—Y ¿también sabes —prosiguió Densher— lo demás?

Kate preguntó extrañada:

—¿Qué es lo demás?

—Pues todo. Fue su visita lo que ella no pudo soportar… Lo que sucedió después sencillamente la ha matado.

—¡Oh! —suspiró muy seria Kate. Pero se había puesto pálida, y él vio que, estuviera o no enterada, no era fingido—. La señora Stringham no nos lo contó.

No obstante, Densher reparó en que no le había preguntado qué había sucedido después; y continuó contribuyendo a su conocimiento.

—Le afectó de tal modo que renunció a vivir. Ha perdido el interés por todo, y por eso se muere.

—¡Ah! —suspiró una vez más lentamente Kate, aunque con una vaguedad que le animó a continuar.

—Ahora se ve que vivía por pura fuerza de voluntad… justo como me dijiste.

—Lo recuerdo. Sí.

—Pues bien, su fuerza de voluntad se quebró, y el colapso lo causó el golpe ruin de ese sujeto. El muy canalla le dijo que tú y yo estamos comprometidos en secreto.

Kate le miró indignada.

—¡Pero si él no lo sabe!

—Eso da igual. El caso es que Milly lo sabía cuando él se marchó. Además —añadió Densher— sí que lo sabe. ¿Cuándo —continuó— fue la última vez que lo viste?

Pero ella estaba absorta en la imagen que se había alzado ante sus ojos.

—¿Por eso ha empeorado?

Densher notó cómo aumentaba su sombría belleza a medida que lo iba entendiendo. Luego repitió las palabras de la señora Stringham:

—Se pasaba el día mirando la pared.

—¡Pobre Milly! —exclamó Kate. Por triviales que fuesen sus palabras, su belleza las revistió de cierto estilo; luego añadió—: Se ha enterado, ya lo ves, demasiado pronto… Por supuesto, una contaba con que no llegase a saberlo nunca. Además, ella estaba convencida, por todo lo que habíamos hecho, de que no había nada entre nosotros, al menos nada preocupante en lo que a ti concernía. —Hizo otra pausa para reflexionar—. Hayas hecho lo que hayas hecho, no fue de ti de quien adquirió esa certeza. La convencí yo.

—¡Oh, eres muy generosa —dijo Densher— al reconocer tu parte!

—¿Es que creías —preguntó Kate— que iba negarlo?

Su mirada y su tono hicieron que lamentase en ese mismo instante su comentario, que de hecho había sido lo primero que había acudido a sus labios, como resultado evidente de lo que ellos habrían llamado la franqueza de Kate. Esta franqueza, visiblemente, era lo único que podía exigirle su propia lealtad. De todos modos, era una cuestión relativamente marginal.

—Por supuesto, estoy seguro de que compartimos nuestro reconocimiento, nuestra responsabilidad… como queramos llamarlo. No es cuestión de hacer partes ni de distinguir envidiosamente entre las impresiones que pretendíamos dar.

—No fue idea tuya dar ninguna impresión —dijo Kate.

Densher estaba tan tenso que la escuchó con una sonrisa que a él mismo le pareció forzada.

—¡No sigas por ese camino!

Tal vez no fuese al seguir por ese camino cuando se le ocurrió otra idea: una idea nacida, evidentemente, de la imagen que él acababa de evocar.

—¿No habría sido posible negar la veracidad de la información? La de lord Mark, digo.

Densher se quedó perplejo.

—Posible ¿para quién?

—Pues para ti.

—¿Decirle que mentía?

—Decirle que estaba equivocado.

Densher la miró fijamente: parecía estupefacto; el «posible» que acababa de considerar Kate era exactamente la alternativa a la que había tenido que enfrentarse en Venecia y que se había visto obligado a descartar. Le pareció muy extraño que lo viesen de manera tan diferente.

—Quieres decir, ¿mentirme a mí mismo? Según creo, cariño —dijo—, todavía estamos comprometidos.

—Pues claro que seguimos comprometidos. Pero ¡si así podías salvarle la vida…!

Él tardó un poco en asimilar su manera de hablar. Por supuesto, tenía que tener presente que Kate siempre simplificaba las cosas, volvió a notar hasta qué punto sus energías, comparadas con las suyas, hacían que muchas cosas le parecieran fáciles; lo cual había despertado muchas veces su admiración.

—Bueno, si quieres saberlo, y me gustaría ser lo más claro posible, ni siquiera consideré seriamente negárselo a la cara. Me dejaron muy claro que tal vez podría salvarle la vida; pero cada vez que lo pensaba acababa descartándolo. Además —añadió—, no habría servido de nada.

—¿Insinúas que no te habría creído? —había respondido con tanta presteza que a él casi le pareció poco sincera, pero se contuvo ante la gravedad de su suposición y ella prosiguió—: ¿Lo intentaste?

—Ni siquiera tuve ocasión.

Kate siguió haciendo gala de unos modales exquisitos, para tenerlo todo delante y al mismo tiempo guardar las distancias.

—¿No quiso verte?

—No después de que tu amigo fuese a visitarla.

Ella dudó.

—¿No podías escribirle?

Densher reflexionó, pero en un sentido diferente.

—Se pasaba el día mirando la pared.

Kate guardó silencio un momento, pero los dos estaban demasiado serios para mostrar una piedad parentética. No obstante, Kate quiso tener al menos un mínimo de luz.

—¿Se negó incluso a dejar que le hablases?

—Ay, niña —replicó Densher—, estaba muy, muy enferma.

—Bueno, antes también lo estaba.

—Y ¿eso no le había impedido…? No —admitió Densher—, es cierto; y no pretendo ocultar que es extraordinaria.

—Prodigiosa —dijo Kate Croy.

Él la miró un momento.

—Y tú también, cariño. Pero así son las cosas —resumió— y así estamos.

Había pensado que tal vez ella lo sondearía en mayor profundidad y le preguntaría por dos o tres cosas concretas. Incluso la había imaginado queriendo saber e intentando averiguar hasta dónde, como dice la frase odiosa, habían llegado Milly y él, y, ya puestos, el grado de intimidad que habían alcanzado. Se había preguntado si estaba preparado para que se lo preguntase, y no había tenido más remedio que contestarse que, por supuesto, estaba preparado para cualquier cosa. ¿Acaso no estaba dispuesto a que ella comprobase si sus dos o tres profecías habían tenido tiempo de cumplirse? Se había creído capaz de decir si la proposición de Milly que debía producirse según la más osada de todas ellas se había producido. Pero estaba comprobando que su disposición a revelar tales cosas no iba ser puesta a prueba. El interés de Kate sobre lo ocurrido seguía siendo tan general que incluso su siguiente pregunta pareció desprovista de aspereza.

—¿Así que, después de la intromisión de lord Mark, no os volvisteis a ver?

Era lo que él estaba esperando desde el principio.

—Sí; nos vimos una vez… si es que puede decirse así. Me había quedado en Venecia… No me marché.

—Lo cual —dijo Kate— obedeció sólo a un mínimo de decoro.

—Exacto. —Se sintió maravillosamente—. No podía hacer menos. Me mandó llamar, fui a verla, y esa misma noche dejé Venecia.

Su compañera esperó.

—¿No habría sido ésa tu oportunidad?

—¿De refutar la historia de lord Mark? No, ni aunque hubiese querido hacerlo delante de ella. Además ¿qué importancia tenía? Se estaba muriendo.

—Bueno —insistió Kate—, y ¿por qué no precisamente porque se estaba muriendo? —No obstante continuó siendo discreta—. Aunque, claro, al verla, tuviste ocasión de juzgarlo.

—Pues claro que al verla tuve ocasión de juzgarlo. ¡Te aseguro que la vi! Además, si hubiese renegado de ti —dijo Densher sin apartar los ojos de ella—, habría actuado en consecuencia.

Ella observó un instante la intención de su rostro.

—¿Insinúas que para convencerla habrías insistido o habrías demostrado de algún modo…?

—¡Digo que para convencerte a ti habría insistido o demostrado de algún modo…!

Por un momento Kate pareció perpleja.

—Para convencerme ¿a mí?

—En esas condiciones, no habría renegado de ti sólo para desdecirme después.

Entonces ella lo entendió y se ruborizó.

—¡Ah! ¿Habrías roto conmigo para que fuese cierto? ¿Me habrías dejado tirada con tal de tener la conciencia tranquila?

—No podría haber hecho otra cosa —dijo Merton Densher—. Ya ves que hice bien en no comprometerme, y que ni siquiera podía concebirlo. Si alguna vez vuelves a pensar que podría haberlo hecho, recuerda mis palabras.

Kate volvió a reflexionar, pero no con el efecto que él pretendía.

—Te has enamorado de ella.

—Llámalo así si quieres… de una moribunda. ¿Qué más te da y qué importancia tiene?

La pregunta surgió de la intensidad y el apremio en que se habían visto inmersos desde que entrara en la sala; pero les dio su momento más extraordinario.

—¡Espera a que haya muerto! La señora Stringham —añadió Kate— telegrafiará. —Luego preguntó en un tono diferente—: Entonces ¿para qué te mandó llamar Milly?

—Es lo que intenté averiguar antes de ir. Debo decirte que no me quedó la menor duda de que en realidad lo que quería era darme, como tú dices, una oportunidad. Supongo que pensó que lo negaría; y comprendí que, si iba a visitarla, me pondría a prueba. Quería oír la verdad de mis propios labios —enseguida lo vi—. Pero estuve con ella veinte minutos, y no me lo pidió.

—No deseaba oír la verdad —dijo Kate con un gesto altivo—. Te deseaba a ti. Habría creído de buen

grado cualquier cosa que le hubieses dicho, aun sabiendo que era falsa. Podías haberle mentido por compasión, y ella lo habría notado y, al ver que lo hacías por ternura, te habría dado las gracias y te habría bendecido y se habría aferrado aún más a ti. En eso consistía tu fuerza, amigo mío, en que te quiere con pasión.

—¡Oh, mi «fuerza»! —murmuró con frialdad Densher.

—De lo contrario, puesto que te mandó llamar, ¿qué quería pedirte? —Y luego, casi sin ironía, mientras él esperaba, añadió—: ¿Fue sólo para volver a verte?

—No quería pedirme nada… nada, excepto que no me quedase en Venecia. Para eso me llamó. Al principio creyó, después de que él fuese a verla, que yo había comprendido la conveniencia de marcharme. No lo hice, pues juzgué conveniente lo contrario, y, al cabo de unos días, se enteró de que aún seguía allí. Y le afectó —dijo Densher.

—Pues claro.

Una vez más, tuvo la sensación de que, a pesar de toda su dignidad, Kate no era sincera.

—Si me había quedado por ella, quiso poner fin a eso, quiso que supiera que no había ninguna necesidad. Y quiso decírmelo a modo de despedida.

—Y ¿lo hizo?

—Cara a cara, sí. En persona, tal como ella quería.

—Y como querías tú.

—No, Kate —respondió con toda la consideración que se tenían—. No como yo quería. Era lo que menos deseaba.

—¿Te fuiste sólo por complacerla?

—Por complacerla. Y, por supuesto, también por complacerte a ti.

—Oh, por mi parte, me alegro.

—¿Te alegras? —imitó vagamente el tono en que había hablado Kate.

—Quiero decir que hiciste lo que tenías que hacer. Sobre todo al quedarte. Pero ¿te pidió que no esperases y ya está? —insistió.

—Sí… con mucha amabilidad.

—¡Ah!, claro, con amabilidad: desde el momento en que te pedía… en fin, semejante esfuerzo. Que no esperases, porque de eso se trataba —añadió Kate—, a verla morir.

—De eso se trataba, cariño —dijo Densher.

—Y ¿tardó veinte minutos en pedírtelo?

Él reflexionó un momento.

—No conté los minutos. Le hice una visita… como cualquier otra.

—¿Cómo cualquier otra persona?

—Como cualquier otra visita.

—¡Ah! —respondió Kate. Densher se interrumpió unos segundos y ella aprovechó para continuar y hacer algo parecido a una de esas preguntas para las que él se había preparado—. ¿Te recibió, en ese estado, en su cuarto?

—No —respondió Merton Densher—. Me recibió como de costumbre en ese enorme y glorioso *salone*, con el vestido que lleva siempre, en su inveterado rincón del sofá. —Su rostro pareció reflejar la escena por un instante, igual que el de ella pareció contemplarlo—. ¿Recuerdas lo que me dijiste de ella una vez?

—¡Ay! He dicho tantas cosas…

—Que no olería a medicamentos, que no sabría a medicinas. Pues bien, así fue.

—¿Así que es cierto que casi era feliz?

Tardó mucho tiempo en responder, ocupado como estaba en parte en reparar en que sólo Kate habría sabido imprimir a esa pregunta un tono totalmente adecuado. No obstante ella esperó con paciencia.

—No creo poder decir ahora lo que era. Algún día… tal vez pueda. Tal vez nos haga bien.

—Algún día… claro. —Fue como si registrara su promesa. Sin embargo, Kate volvió a hablar con brusquedad—. Se recuperará.

—Bueno —dijo Densher—, ya lo verás.

Por un instante ella pareció intentarlo.

—¿Dejó traslucir de algún modo sus sentimientos? En fin —explicó Kate—, al verse traicionada.

No le apremió mucho, desde luego; pero él acababa de decirle que prefería pasarlo por alto.

—Sólo dejó traslucir su fuerza y su belleza.

—Entonces —preguntó su compañera—, ¿de qué sirve su fuerza?

Él pareció mirar por todas partes en busca de algún uso que darle; pero pronto dejó de intentarlo.

—Tiene que morir, cariño, a su manera tan extraordinaria.

—Claro. Pero no acabo de ver qué pruebas tienes de que estuviese enfadada contigo.

—Tengo la prueba de que se negó a verme muchos días.

—Pero estaba enferma.

—Como acabas de decir, eso no se lo había impedido antes… Si hubiese sido sólo la enfermedad, a ella no le habría importado.

—¿Te habría recibido de todos modos?

—Me habría recibido de todos modos.

—¡Ah, bueno —dijo Kate—, si estás tan seguro…!

—Pues claro que lo estoy. También lo sé por la señora Stringham.

—Y ¿qué sabe la señora Stringham?

—Todo.

Lo miró un rato más largo.

—¿Todo?

—Todo.

—¿Se lo contaste tú?

—Lo comprendió ella. No le he contado nada. Es de esas personas que se percatan de las cosas.

Kate se quedó pensativa.

—Porque también le gustas a ella. También ella es prodigiosa. Ya ves lo que hace el interés por un hombre. Lo que sea. No tienes nada que temer.

—No temo nada —dijo Densher.

Kate se cambió de sitio y miró el reloj, que dio las cinco. Comprobó la mesita del té, donde el enorme hervidor de plata de la tía Maud, que llevaba un rato sobre un infiernillo y que ella había olvidado, silbaba con mucha fuerza.

—¡Bueno, es todo perfecto! —exclamó mientras echaba en la tetera más cucharadas de té de la cuenta. Densher la observó un rato y luego se acercó a la mesa mientras ella vertía el agua humeante—. ¿Quieres un poco?

Él dudó.

—¿No sería mejor esperar…?

—¿A la tía Maud? —Ella entendió por qué lo decía: por la prohibición, según su antigua ley, de cualquier cosa que pudiera delatar su intimidad—. ¡Oh, ya no hay por qué preocuparse! ¡Lo hemos conseguido!

—¿Engañarla?

—Ganárnosla. La has complacido.

Densher aceptó la taza de té de manera mecánica. Estaba pensando en otra cosa, y sus pensamientos encontraron una salida al cabo de un momento.

—¡Qué grosero he debido ser!

—¿Grosero?

—Para complacer a tanta gente.

—¡Ah! —dijo Kate con un destello de alegría—, lo has hecho para complacerme a mí. —Pero enseguida volvió sobre el asunto—. Lo que no entiendo es… ¿quieres azúcar?

—Sí, por favor.

—Lo que no entiendo —continuó después de servírsela— es qué fue lo que la hizo cambiar de opinión. Se negó a verte muchos días, ¿qué hizo que volviera a querer verte?

Planteó la pregunta con la taza en la mano, pero él se mostró dispuesto a responder a pesar de la extraña ironía de que estuviesen hablándolo sentados a la mesita del té.

—Fue *sir* Luke Strett. Su visita, su presencia allí.

—Entonces, la devolvió a la vida.

—Al menos por lo que pude ver.

—¿E intercedió por ti?

—No creo que intercediera. La verdad es que no sé qué hizo.

Kate volvió a quedarse pensativa.

—¿No te lo dijo?

—No se lo pregunté. Le vi, pero apenas hablamos de ella.

Kate lo miró con fijeza.

—Entonces ¿cómo lo sabes?

—Lo veo. Lo noto. Estuve con él como nunca…

—¡Ah! Y ¿también le gustaste a él? ¿Fue eso?

—Lo entendió —dijo Densher.

—Pero ¿qué fue lo que entendió?

Él hizo una pausa.

—Que mi intención era buena.

—¡Ah! Y ¿se lo hizo ver a ella? Entiendo —continuó como si tal cosa—, pero ¿cómo la convenció?

Densher dejó la taza en la mesa y apartó la mirada.

—Tendrás que preguntárselo a *sir* Luke.

Se quedó mirando al fuego y se produjo un momento de silencio.

—Lo mejor de todo —volvió a empezar Kate— es que está contenta. Que es —continuó, mirándolo desde el otro lado de la mesa— el motivo por el que me he esforzado.

—¿Contenta de morir en la flor de su juventud?

—Bueno, en paz contigo.

—¡Oh, «en paz»! —murmuró sin apartar la vista del fuego.

—La paz de haber amado.

Densher alzó los ojos hacia ella.

—¿Es eso paz?

—De haber sido amada —continuó—. Es decir —concluyó—, de haber llevado a término su pasión. No quería otra cosa. Ha tenido todo lo que quería. —Lucida y solemne como siempre, lo dijo con una bella autoridad, a la que él no pudo responder con palabras. Sólo pudo mirarla, aunque con la sensación de estar dando, a su pesar, la impresión de asentir con su silencio. Casi como si lo interpretara de ese modo, ella se levantó de la mesa y fue hacia la chimenea—. Tal vez te parezca horrible que ahora, que ya —recalcó la palabra—, pretenda sacar conclusiones. Pero no hemos fracasado.

—¡Oh! —se limitó a murmurar Densher.

Una vez más, estaba cerca de él, tanto como el día que fue a verle en Venecia, cuyo recuerdo sirvió para subrayar y recalcar ese hecho. En tales condiciones, apenas podía negar nada de lo que ella decía, y lo que decía era, visiblemente, fruto de ese mismo convencimiento.

—Hemos triunfado —dijo mirándolo profundamente a los ojos—. No te habrá querido por nada. —Él torció el gesto, pero Kate insistió—. Y tú tampoco me habrás querido por nada.

II

Pasó varios días bajo la profunda impresión de aquella frase que todo lo abarcaba, felizmente prolongada varios momentos, pero interrumpida, por así decirlo, en su apogeo por la entrada de la tía Maud, que los encontró juntos cerca del fuego. El rumbo de la conversación, no obstante, por claro que fuese, no lo fue, extrañamente, tanto para su inteligencia como el de una conversación a solas con la señora Lowder, como la que tuvo, o más bien Kate le dio ocasión de tener. Lo que ocurrió, cuando entró por fin en la sala, despertó, Densher se dio cuenta enseguida, su deseo de estar con él a solas. No cabe duda de que, al abrirse la puerta, los dos se separaron con cierta precipitación, por lo que ella los miró, primero al uno y luego al otro, con sus ojos bellos e implacables; sin embargo eso no fue nada, para la imaginación de Densher, comparado con la extraña cautela de la que hizo gala su compañera. Al instante, le contó a su tía lo que más le había preocupado a ella misma, y la hizo partícipe de su conversación, sin duda con gran éxito, puesto que el hecho al que con resentimiento aludió le proporcionó a la buena señora una excusa sobrada:

—¿Sabías, querida, que han pasado tres semanas enteras…? —Y se calló, como para dejar que la señora Lowder considerase por sí misma esa extravagancia. Densher, por supuesto, comprendió enseguida que la clave para proteger a Kate era sacar el máximo provecho de eso; y que su rastro, como él mismo podría haber dicho, estaba borrado por el tiempo que, cuando volvió a admitirlo, dio una vez más a su anfitriona la medida de su escasa impaciencia por volver a verlas. Kate se marchó como si no hiciesen falta más explicaciones para poner de manifiesto lo delicado de su situación personal. Había recibido a su visitante en nombre de su tía: un visitante por quien en otro tiempo se había sospechado que sentía demasiada inclinación y que ahora regresaba como el afligido pretendiente de otra persona. No era que el destino de esa otra persona, su exquisita amiga, tras aquel giro trágico, no le interesase también a ella, sino que admitir al señor Densher como fuente de información tenía por fuerza que resultarle incómodo. Kate inventó esa incomodidad delante mismo de Densher y él se maravilló por la facilidad con que la había ideado. Le sirvió como la hermosa nube que pende sobre una diosa en un poema épico, y el joven ni siquiera llegó a saber vagamente en qué momento de su visita Kate se fundió delicadamente con ella y desapareció.

Enseguida lo ocupó otra cuestión: ni más ni menos, que la realidad de la notable diferencia que los sucesos de Venecia habían introducido en su relación con la tía Maud y que esas semanas de separación habían hecho madurar para él. Antes de sentarse a la mesita del té ya notó que lo hacía en unas condiciones totalmente nuevas y, cuando ella insistió en servirle otra taza, le pareció que tenía muchas ganas de definirlas y establecerlas. Lamentaba, aunque comprendía, que lo que estaba ocurriendo le hubiese obligado a quedarse; las dos —desde que se enteraron por la pobre Susan de que había partido de Venecia— habían deseado verle pronto; como es natural, habrían preferido que hubiese vuelto directamente. Pero no necesitaba que le recordasen que era justo la escena —con lo que quería decir la tragedia que lo había absorbido y entretenido—, el recuerdo, la sombra y el pesar de ésta lo que había determinado su retraimiento. De ese modo lo presentó, por así decirlo, ante sí mismo con el disfraz con que lo había revestido, y prestó un elemento de verdad al personaje que por su parte Densher acabó adoptando. Lo trató como a un hombre asolado y devastado, frustrado y ya desposeído; y, al reparar en que eso abría un nuevo capítulo de franqueza con ella, él comprendió también hasta qué punto facilitaría sus avances con Kate. La joven sería más accesible que nunca; en Lancaster Gate, lo asociarían a algo claramente incompatible con cualquier otra idea. Comprendió con vividez que, si quería, podría «aprovechar» esa asociación: no tenía más que visitar la casa a su antojo con la actitud que le habían prescrito y ya no tendría que abandonarla. Lo más raro de todo fue el modo en que, al final de la semana, tuvo la sensación de someterse a las opiniones de la señora Lowder. En cierto modo, tales opiniones lo habían empujado hasta un punto del que no podía regresar. En ciertos momentos se preguntaba para sus adentros qué había sido de su sinceridad; en

otros, se limitaba a concluir que la estaba utilizando al completo. Con lo único que no era sincero era con el exagerado sentimentalismo de la tía Maud. Era enormemente sentimental, y lo peor que hizo Densher fue seguirle la corriente. Él no lo era: todo era demasiado real; aunque, en cualquier caso, no era falso que las había pasado moradas.

Sobre todo no era falso, por ejemplo, que, cuando ella le dijo, el domingo, casi confortablemente, en su sofá, mientras tomaban el té: «¡Quiero que no le quede la menor duda, amigo mío, de que estoy con usted hasta el final!», no le quedó otro remedio que contemporizar. Estaba con él hasta el final —o podría estarlo — de un modo en que Kate no lo estaba; y, para que literalmente eso hiciese que su compañía fuese más agradable, bastaba con no preguntarse por qué no había de ser así. ¿Estaba fingiendo en cierto modo una especie de regusto que no era real? ¿Cómo iba a hacerlo cuando, día tras día, ese regusto era su mayor realidad? En el fondo era lo único que había entre ellos y, en dos o tres ocasiones, pasaron así las horas. Fueron ocasiones —dos y pico— en las que había ido a verla y se había marchado sin aludir siquiera a Kate. Ahora que más que nunca estaba autorizado para preguntar por ella, un extraño giro de su relación la había convertido en una nota falsa. Otro giro no menos extraño era que, cuando hablaba de Milly con la tía Maud, no saliera a relucir ninguna otra cosa. Iba a verla casi abiertamente por eso, y lo más raro era que se lo exigía su propio estado de nervios. Le había tomado afecto; se estaba comportando, tuvo ocasión de repetirse, como si la apreciara más que nunca. La clave estaba en que ella también contemporizaba. No habría podido tener mayor amplitud de miras, ni ser más locuaz, ni más compasiva. Parecía complacerla, satisfacerla, verlo tal como era; y eso también tenía sus efectos. Por supuesto, lo último que habría imaginado era ese cambio, merced al cual se sentía totalmente libre con aquella señora; y que no se habría producido si —por otra enormidad— no hubiese dejado de ser libre con Kate. Así fue como, en la tercera ocasión en que se quedó a solas con ella, se vio diciéndole algo que no habría podido contarle a Kate. De hecho, la señora Lowder sólo le hizo pasar un mal momento, a propósito de lo que debía ocultarle. Fue el primer domingo, después de que Kate se quitara de en medio, cuando expresó su pesar de que no hubiese podido quedarse en Venecia hasta el final. A él le resultó difícil explicárselo, pero ella acudió finalmente en su ayuda.

—¿No podía usted resistirlo?

—No podía resistirlo. ¡Además, verá…! —Pero se interrumpió.

—Además ¿qué? —Densher había estado a punto de continuar… pero comprendió los peligros; por suerte, no obstante, ella volvió a ayudarle—. Además… ¡lo sé! Los hombres, en numerosas circunstancias, no tienen el valor de las mujeres.

—No tienen el valor de las mujeres.

—Kate o yo nos habríamos quedado —declaró—, si no hubiésemos tenido que irnos por el motivo que usted supo agradecer con tanta franqueza.

Densher no dijo nada sobre su agradecimiento: ¿no lo había demostrado suficientemente con sus actos desde aquel momento? Pero no pudo contenerse y afirmó:

—No me cabe la menor duda de que la señorita Croy se habría quedado.

Y, de paso, comprendió la maravilla que era Susan Shepherd. No había hecho más que protegerle… No había hecho más que encubrirle. Estaba claro que, en su copiosa correspondencia con la amiga de su juventud, todavía no había dicho nada que pudiera comprometerlo. Le había hablado de la renuncia de Milly, pero sólo como un empeoramiento de su estado; le había contado la visita de lord Mark, pues podría haberse enterado por otras vías y no quería que pensara que se la estaba ocultando, pero había eliminado cualquier vínculo o explicación y sobre todo, que él supiera, bendita fuese su alma puritana, había inventado ficciones muy favorables. Por eso él disfrutaba ahora de esa tranquilidad. Por eso, cruzaba la pierna que no paraba de moverse con un constante desasosiego, se recostaba en cómodas sillas de satén amarillo y se dejaba consolar. Es cierto que la tía Maud le hacía preguntas que Kate no le había hecho; pero la diferencia era que, viniendo de ella, le gustaban. Al partir de Venecia había tomado la decisión de actuar como si Milly hubiese muerto ya, pues sólo de ese modo su espíritu podría resistir la espera. La había dejado porque ella se lo había pedido y no era propio de él, como se dice en Estados Unidos, oponerse a sus deseos; y eso le imponía la punzante necesidad de ocupar su tiempo. La incertidumbre le parecía el peor de los sufrimientos y no quería pasar por eso; lo último que deseaba era olvidar a Milly: tan sólo quería olvidar que sufría la tortura de ser consciente de su enfermedad y que ese dolor debía estar crucificándola. Esperar en Londres sabiendo que su dolor continuaba ¿de qué serviría sino para hacer que sus días fuesen imposibles? Su plan, por tanto, era convencerse —por medios no del todo claros— de que la espera había concluido. «En realidad ¿qué otra cosa puedo hacer? —se repetía inquieto—. Más vale pensar que todo ha terminado, como puede suceder en cualquier momento, y volver a ser bueno para algo o para alguien. Tal

como estoy no le sirvo a nadie, y menos a ella». Así que lo intentó, en la medida en que cerrar los ojos y pasear con gesto sombrío podía considerarse un intento; pero su plan, como es de suponer, no tuvo ni mucho éxito ni mucha lógica. Los días, breves o largos, eran una dura realidad; descartar sus preocupaciones era una idea muy poco afortunada; la vida misma tenía un poso de incertidumbre. En el fondo, la clave era que estaba esperando; y no hacía falta mucha agudeza para darse cuenta de que, si apreciaba cada día más a la señora Lowder, era justo por ese motivo.

Le ayudó a aguantar y a la vez fue lo bastante sutil —Densher notó que ella había adivinado lo que quería—, para no insistir en la realidad de la tensión que reinaba entre ellos. Lo más cerca que estuvo de lograr lo que quería, a falta de algo mejor, fue servirle de algo a la tía Maud; su compañía le relajaba incluso cuando los dos fingían que la tragedia había concluido. Hablaban de la moribunda en pasado; lo peor que decían de ella era que había sido extraordinaria. Por otro lado, no obstante, insistían mucho —sin que eso contribuyera demasiado a la paz de Densher— en que «extraordinaria» era la palabra exacta. Reconocerlo era lo que más le calmaba; así que volvía una y otra vez sobre el asunto; hablaba de ello sabiendo que el tiempo corría en su contra y, en particular, como hemos dicho, hablaba de sus impresiones más personales como nunca lo había hecho con Kate. Casi parecía que la señora Lowder disfrutara de la perfección de esos sentimientos: se sentaba a contemplar la escena, como si él no pudiera evitar contárselo, igual que la mujer de un rollizo ciudadano podría haberse sentado en una obra de teatro que hiciese llorar a la gente, en el foso entre el círculo familiar. Lo que más la conmovía era el modo en que la pobre chica debía haber querido vivir.

—¡Ah, sí, desde luego! Por supuesto, por supuesto: ¿por qué no iba a quererlo si lo tenía todo en el mundo? ¡Con todo ese dinero, pobrecilla, aunque espero que no juzgue usted de mal gusto que lo saque a relucir en un momento así…!

La tía Maud lo sacaba a relucir —y Densher así lo entendía— sólo para infundir cierta poesía a la vida a la que se aferraba Milly: una imagen de lo que «habría podido ser» ante la cual la buena señora se veía de nuevo reducida a las lágrimas. Había tenido su propia idea de esas posibilidades, y su propio uso social para ellas, y, puesto que Milly había estado tan de acuerdo, ¿qué era aquella crueldad, sino una crueldad, en cierto sentido, con ella misma? Aún se hizo más evidente cuando él le contó lo más espantoso: que, por mucho que lo disimulara, su joven amiga sentía un terror infinito ante el final; asunto al que después aludieron a menudo, pues a él le procuraba un extraño alivio. Densher lo consideraba en toda su crudeza, como si, por una cuestión de principios se negara a acobardarse, al menos espiritualmente. Milly se había aferrado con pasión a su sueño de un futuro y se vio separada de él, sin gritos, sólo con un triste y espantoso silencio, como el de alguna joven noble antes de partir al cadalso en la Revolución francesa a quien separasen en la puerta de la cárcel de algún objeto al que se abrazara para infundirse valor. Densher, en un momento de frialdad, dibujó la escena para la señora Lowder, aunque aún no había tenido ningún momento de suficiente frialdad para dibujársela de ese modo a Kate. Y esa actitud era lo que había sido heroico en Milly, una actitud que, como a estas alturas sabía la tía Maud, exhibió con elevado heroísmo cuando fue a despedirse de ella. Le había contado, a mayor gloria de la joven, cómo le había recibido en esa ocasión: con una majestuosidad principesca, pues sin duda era una auténtica princesa, como decía siempre la señora Stringham.

Ante el fuego, en el gran salón cubierto de arabescos y querubines, todo oropel y colorido, y que a esa hora entibiaba también el sol otoñal, dicha majestuosidad se había conservado y la situación había sido sublime, según dijo Densher en beneficio de los exquisitos cotilleos londinenses. Los cotilleos —pues en eso se quedaban sus comentarios en Lancaster Gate— no fueron menos exquisitos porque utilizara un velo de plata, ni por otro lado el velo, apenas rozado, se descorrió demasiado. En realidad, él mismo contemplaba la escena como si la viera en la página de un libro. Veía a un joven a lo lejos, inmerso en una relación inconcebible, lo veía callado, pasivo, conteniendo el aliento, pero entendiendo a medias, vagamente consciente de algo inmenso y tratando penosamente de dominarse para no perderlo. El joven que veía en esos momentos estaba demasiado lejos y era demasiado extraño para identificarlo; sin embargo, luego, fuera, reconocía su propio rostro. Sabía al mismo tiempo de qué era consciente el joven, y día tras día comprobaba lo poco que había perdido. Allí, con la señora Lowder, supo que lo había recogido todo —y ambos se lo daban a entender mutuamente en los ratos en que cruzaban elocuentes miradas—. No podían ir más allá, pero bastaba con que ella supiera lo esencial. Lo esencial era que le había sucedido algo demasiado bello y sagrado para describirlo. Había recobrado el juicio y había sido perdonado, consagrado, bendecido; pero no podía expresarlo con coherencia. Habría requerido una explicación —fatal para la fe que tenía en él la señora Lowder— sobre la naturaleza del mal que aquejaba a Milly. De modo que se limitaban a contemplar la maravillosa escena desde la puerta. Notaban la presencia en el interior de la

sala… Reparaban en el silencio opresivo; y luego, reforzados así sus vínculos, se alejaban de allí.

Eso en sí mismo se convirtió para nuestro inquieto amigo al final de la semana en el principio de reacción: de manera que una mañana despertó con la sensación de haber desempeñado un papel del que debía renegar por respeto a sí mismo. Nunca había dado a entender en Lancaster Gate que, al ser un hombre obsesionado —un hombre perseguido por un recuerdo—, fuese inofensivo; pero la señora Lowder aceptó, admiró y explicó hasta tal punto esa nueva apariencia que casi adquirió el peso de una afirmación. La actitud de ella afirmaba constantemente lo que él no había dicho: lo tenía ya por un hombre obsesionado e inofensivo. No obstante, eso dio a su propósito un elemento de honradez y, cuando terminó de vestirse, ya había dado con su propio correctivo. Estaban cerca de Navidad, pero ese año la Navidad, igual que ocurría en Londres muchos años, era desconcertantemente cálida; el aire tranquilo era suave, la luz gris, la enorme ciudad parecía vacía, y en el parque, donde la hierba era verde, donde pastaban las ovejas, donde los pájaros trinaban multitudinarios, las rectas avenidas se prestaban a la lentitud y las vistas borrosas a la intimidad. Esa mañana asió con fuerza, hasta que salió de casa, su sacrificio al honor, y luego lo llevó consigo a la oficina de Correos más próxima y lo plasmó en un telegrama; convencido de que era un sacrificio sólo porque, por diversas razones, le había parecido un esfuerzo. Si se lo pareció fue por la previsible oposición de Kate, que no sería menor que en ocasiones anteriores, razón por la cual —tal vez con cierta ingenuidad por su parte— procuró que el telegrama sonase persuasivo. Aunque era un recuerdo de momentos tiernos, tuvo que ser, por la joven de detrás de la ventanilla, un tanto críptico; pero hubo mucho tanto de lo uno como de lo otro, pues representaba un impulso generoso y se gastó un par de chelines. Hubo también un momento ese mismo día, en el parque, mientras observaba atentamente uno de los senderos que habían frecuentado en otro tiempo, en que un crítico cínico podría haber dado por sentado que estaba considerando las posibilidades de recuperar su dinero. Esperaba —estaba acostumbrado: el peligro de Lancaster Gate estaba prácticamente a la vuelta de la esquina—, pero ella había corrido el riesgo otras veces. Además, ahora era menor, gracias al extraño giro que había dado su relación; a pesar de lo cual estaba más serio mientras esperaba y observaba.

Kate llegó por fin por el camino que a él le había parecido menos probable, como si viniera de Marble Arch; pero su llegada fue una respuesta: eso era lo que importaba; una respuesta dibujada en el rostro de la joven y más agradable para él, incluso después de las respuestas de la tía Maud, que ninguna otra cosa desde su regreso a Londres. Era cierto que no había respondido a su telegrama, y que él había empezado a temerse, al ver que se retrasaba, que intuyendo que él tenía intención de volver a presionarla, hubiera decidido —aunque fuese con cierto desasosiego— privarle de su oportunidad. Por supuesto, Kate sabía que tendría otras, pero tal vez viese que la presente era especialmente peligrosa para ella. De hecho, el propio Densher notaba que ésa era precisamente la razón por la que lo había preparado así, y se había regocijado, incluso mientras esperaba, al comprobar que las circunstancias le recordaban a tiempos mejores y más sencillos. Por un capricho del tiempo, pese a ser el día más corto del año, el parque estaba casi igual que en las tardes soleadas en que se habían producido sus primeros encuentros. Este y aquel árbol que se veían sobre la hierba extendían sus ramas desnudas sobre las dos sillas en las que se habían sentado en otro tiempo y en las cuales —pues podían volver a sentarse en ellas— podrían recobrar la claridad de las primeras veces. En todo caso, fue eso lo primero que se reflejó en el rostro de Kate cuando acudió a paso vivo a su encuentro. Su paso, cuando finalmente llegó a donde él estaba, le sirvió al principio, aunque sólo fuese para demostrarle una vez más lo guapa que estaba. Recordaba que en los últimos tiempos había ocurrido con frecuencia que, en determinados momentos, la creyera más bella que nunca; uno de ellos, por ejemplo, que todavía tenía muy presente, había sido su entrada, bajo la mirada de su tía, en Lancaster Gate, el día en que cenó allí a su regreso de Estados Unidos; y otro su figura en el mismo sitio hacía dos domingos: la luz con que iluminó sus ojos que aún llevaban consigo el recuerdo de Venecia. En el curso de uno o dos minutos, sintió, como otras veces, cierta aprensión ante el sello que pudiera imprimir la Fortuna.

Fuese lo que fuese que hubieran determinado las horas recordadas, formó enseguida un vínculo con un efecto que en realidad había notado más de una vez esa semana, sólo que ahora de manera mucho más intensa. Un efecto que había notado e identificado ya: el de la actitud adoptada por su amiga ante su respuesta a la acogida que le había dispensado la señora Lowder y en la que ella no podía sino haber reparado. Lo había notado, y se lo demostró de manera muy bella: adoptando en honor suyo una leve y estudiada serenidad, una sombra de alegría sobre los efectos del tiempo. Todo por supuesto era relativo, dada la sombra bajo la que vivían; pero la manera en que le perdonó que prefiriese a la tía Maud para sus confidencias tenía casi una nota de alegría. Había consagrado así la distinción, por ingrata que fuese para ella; y nada, en realidad, podría haberle dado mejor, si la hubiese querido, la medida de la superioridad de Kate. Sin duda fue esa superioridad la que imprimió esa suave decisión a sus pasos y esa encantadora

valentía a su mirada: una valentía que se intensificó cuando él planteó la cuestión que lo había llevado allí. No esperó más que el tiempo necesario para decirle, mientras pasaba la mano de Kate bajo su brazo y echaba a andar por los mismos sitios que antaño, que no pretendía disimular que en los últimos tiempos había habido momentos en los que no había creído que pudiera volver a ser tan feliz. Kate respondió, pasando por alto los motivos, cualesquiera que fuesen, de sus dudas, que ella confiaba en que serían muy felices si tenían paciencia; aunque nada le parecía tan maravilloso como la idea de dar un paseo. Por supuesto, después de lo sucedido, era sólo un espejismo que pudieran verse en la casa; habló de sus oportunidades como si no hubiesen sufrido ningún perjuicio. En cualquier caso, él le hizo saber que en ningún caso quería perjudicar la oportunidad presente, y en un sitio apartado, al pie de un enorme árbol invernal, le suplicó vivamente:

—Hemos jugado a un juego espantoso y hemos perdido. Nos debemos a nosotros mismos, a lo que sentimos por nosotros mismos y el uno por el otro, no esperar ni un día más. Nuestra boda, en cierto sentido, ¿es que no lo ves?, enmendará todos los errores, y no sé cómo expresarte mi impaciencia. No tenemos más que anunciarla… y nos habremos quitado ese peso de encima.

—¿«Anunciarla»? —preguntó Kate. Lo dijo como si no le entendiera, aunque le había escuchado sin la menor confusión.

—Pues celebrarla… mañana, si quieres; hagámoslo y anunciemos que está hecho. Eso es lo que menos importancia tiene… Después ya nada tendrá importancia. Estaremos tan bien —dijo— que seremos fuertes; nos extrañará haber tenido miedo. Nos parecerá una locura absurda. Una pesadilla.

Kate lo miró sin pestañear… con el mismo gesto que tenía al llegar; pero él reparó en la extraña frialdad de su brillantez.

—Cariño, ¿qué te ha pasado?

—Pues que no lo aguanto más. Eso es. Algo se ha quebrado, se ha roto, en mi interior, y aquí me tienes. Tienes que aceptarme como soy.

Vio que ella se esforzaba por fingir que lo estaba considerando, aunque también notó que no lo estaba haciendo. Sin embargo, vio, sintió, es más oyó cómo se esforzaba con su voz clara por ser muy dulce con él.

—No entiendo, no sé, qué es lo que ha cambiado. —Esbozó una amplia y extraña sonrisa—. Nos va muy bien juntos y ¿de pronto me abandonas?

Él la miró con impotencia.

—¿Esto te parece «muy bien»? ¡Por Dios, a veces dices unas cosas…!

—Me parece perfecto… desde mi punto de vista. Estoy justo donde estaba; y tendrás que darme una razón mejor para que crea que tú no lo estás también. Me parece —continuó— que lo que ha ocurrido entre nosotros sólo tiene sentido si esperamos. No creo que queramos portarnos como idiotas.

Al oírla, él reparó en su lógica imperturbable; y en la calmosa y extraña impotencia de verla hablar en el aire cargado de recuerdos. La había llevado allí para conmoverla y había resultado ser inconmovible, y no porque no le comprendiera. Lo entendía todo, incluso las cosas que él se negaba a entender; y tenía razones, muy en el fondo, que casi le producían náuseas. Pero sobre todo tenía su extraña y elocuente sonrisa.

—Claro que, si sabes algo… —Él vio que a Kate le parecía concebible y posible que así fuera. Pero ni siquiera supo a qué se refería, y se limitó a mirarla entristecido. Su tristeza, no obstante, no la alteró—. Creo que así es, y que lo que pasa es que no quieres decirlo por delicadeza. Tanta delicadeza conmigo, cariño, es tener demasiados escrúpulos. No me escandalizaré, así que si me lo cuentas …

—¿Y bien? —preguntó Densher cuando ella se calló lo que ocurriría en ese caso.

—Pues que haré lo que quieras. En ese caso, puedes estar seguro, no tendríamos que esperar y entiendo por qué dices que sería mejor no hacerlo. Ni siquiera te pido —continuó— una prueba. Me basta con tu certeza moral.

En ese momento, lo comprendió con la fuerza de un torbellino.

Lo que le había dicho estaba muy claro, tanto que, cuando lo entendió, la sangre tiñó su rostro.

—No sé nada.

—¿No tienes ni idea?

—Ni idea.

—Consentiría en casarme contigo —dijo Kate—, lo anunciaría mañana, hoy mismo, iría ahora mismo a casa y se lo diría a la tía Maud, a cambio de una idea: pero tienes que dármela tú, tiene que ser tuya y me la tienes que dar de buena fe. ¡Ya lo ves, cariño! —y volvió a esbozar una sonrisa—. A eso le llamo yo estar de acuerdo.

Si así lo llamaba, su ruego era inútil, y sólo podía quedarse allí con su pasión malgastada —pues esa mañana había actuado con pasión— pintada en el rostro. Kate comprendió todo lo que giraba en torno a

ella: la idea que él no tenía y la que sí tenía, su rechazo a sus presiones, lo que sentía ante su presencia y el horror que le infundía su lucidez. Todo eso se mezclaba en él de un modo que podría haber sido rabia, pero que se estaba convirtiendo rápidamente en frialdad, que conducía a otra cosa y era como un amanecer oscuro. Le afectó y tuvo uno de esos impulsos sinceros que los habían sacado de situaciones parecidas otras veces. Cuando se acercó a él, cuando le puso la mano en el hombro, y le obligó a sentarse a su lado, mientras se apoyaba en él, en su viejo par de sillas, impidió de manera irresistible, contuvo, el derroche de su pasión. Ahora era ella quien dominaba esa pasión.

III

En el parque, en respuesta a su pregunta, le había dicho a Kate que no había «ocurrido» nada que justificara su petición: nada, quería decir con eso, desde lo que había contado, a su regreso, a propósito de su reciente experiencia. Pero, al cabo de unos días —que lo llevaron a la mañana de Navidad—, sabía, mientras se preparaba para ir a verla, que había cierta diferencia. Ahora sí le había ocurrido algo, y, después de pasar la noche meditándolo, concluyó que era importante, por no decir primordial, volver a verla. El hecho en sí había ido a su encuentro allí, en su humilde apartamento, el día de Nochebuena, y al principio no cayó en que acarreara esa consecuencia. Mientras pasaba las horas considerándolo —un proceso que convirtió esa noche en implacablemente insomne—, las posibles consecuencias le parecieron tan numerosas como para volver loco a cualquiera. Su espíritu se enfrentó a ellas, en la oscuridad, mientras pasaban lentas las horas; su inteligencia y su imaginación, su alma y su juicio, nunca se habían visto sometidos a tanta tensión. La dificultad en ese momento era que se encontraba ante dos posibilidades, y no se trataba de preferir una u otra. No estaban en una perspectiva en la que pudiera compararlas y considerarlas; se hallaban, por un extraño efecto, tan próximas como un par de monstruos cuyos ojos enormes y cálido aliento notara en cada mejilla. Veía las dos al mismo tiempo al mirar hacia delante, aunque, en su fría aprensión, no se habría atrevido a mover la cabeza ni un milímetro. Así que la suya fue una agitación inmóvil: esas lentas horas las dominaron gestos intranquilos. Pasó mucho tiempo tendido, después del incidente, en el sofá, donde, tras apagar con los dedos la luz de cortesía que tanto odiaba, se había tumbado sin desvestirse. Contempló el día que se extinguía y se dedicó a dejar pasar el tiempo; con la llegada de la aurora navideña, gris y tardía, se sintió más decidido. El sentido común le decía que, ante la duda, era mejor no actuar; y tal vez fuese esa ramplonería lo que le resultó de más ayuda. En su caso no había nada de eso, menos que ninguna otra vez en su vida: y esa asociación, de una cosa con otra, funcionó como una elección. Actuó, después de bañarse y desayunar, en el sentido de ese elemento tan marcado de lo raro que le parecía lo más característico de su crisis. Y por eso, vestido con más elegancia de costumbre, casi como si fuese a ir a la iglesia, salió al cálido día de Navidad.

Por lo visto, la acción, para él, llegado el momento, suponía cierta complejidad. Al andar a su lado habríamos adivinado que su primera decisión definitiva no había sido ir a casa de *sir* Luke Strett, y no obstante ese paso, aunque secundario, era casi igual de apremiante. Su primera decisión tenía que ver con otra cosa, a la que, nada más ponerse en camino, se sumó la impaciencia; aunque comprendió que tal vez fuese demasiado temprano para ponerla en práctica. Eso, y la efervescencia de su interior, eran razón suficiente para ir a pie; por no hablar de la ausencia de coches de caballos en el oscuro desierto festivo. La gran plaza de *sir* Luke no estaba cerca, pero recorrió la distancia sin ver siquiera un cabriolé. Dispuso así de ese tiempo para reconsiderar sus opiniones, que no dependían sólo de lo sucedido aquella noche; aunque a la complejidad de la que acabamos de hablar se añadió otra cosa pocos minutos después. Ante la casa de *sir* Luke, cuando llegó, había parado un cupé; al verlo el corazón le dio un vuelco y tuvo que detenerse un instante. La pausa no fue muy larga, pero sí lo suficiente para tener una revelación que le hizo contener el aliento. El carruaje, muy posiblemente el de *sir* Luke, a juzgar por la hora y el día, le pareció un indicio de que el gran cirujano había vuelto. Eso significaría también otra cosa, aún con más seguridad, y ante esa doble aprensión notó que se había quedado pálido. Su imaginación rebotó por un momento como un proyectil que choca de pronto con otro; comprendió la extraña verdad de que antes que a Kate Croy prefería ver al testigo recién llegado de Venecia. Quería estar en su presencia y oír su voz; y ese espasmo de lucidez fue como un destello. Por suerte para él, enseguida ocurrió algo que lo apagó. Al cabo de un minuto reparó en que en el pescante del cupé el cochero tenía un rostro que le resultaba familiar, y, que él supiera, nunca había visto el coche del gran médico. Cuando se acercó, vio que el cupé era el de la señora Lowder: el rostro en el pescante era el mismo que veía fuera esperando, al entrar y salir de Lancaster Gate. Así

comprendió lo demás: la señora de Lancaster Gate, llevada por un impulso no muy distinto al suyo, había ido en busca de noticias; y estaba claro que las había, puesto que el cupé aún seguía allí. De modo que *sir* Luke había regresado… sólo que la señora Lowder estaba con él.

Densher volvió a detenerse bajo la influencia de esta última reflexión; y entonces cayó en otra cosa: estaba claro —en vista de lo que había deducido— que se trataba de algo urgente; y, en caso de urgencia, Kate, con tal de enterarse cuanto antes, podía haber ido con su tía. La posibilidad de que, de ser así, se hallara en el interior del carruaje —era lo más probable— tuvo el efecto, antes de que pudiera contenerse, de llevarlo hasta la ventanilla. No era el lugar donde quería verla; pero, si estaba allí, no podía fingir no reconocerla. No obstante, lo que vio un momento después fue que si había alguien no era Kate Croy. Se llevó la considerable sorpresa de encontrarse con la última cara conocida que había visto a través del limpio cristal de un café en Venecia. Los enormes ventanales del Florian, incluso con las persianas echadas, eran un medio menos oscuro que el aire de una Navidad londinense; pero, aun así, ambos tuvieron tiempo de reconocerse. Densher notó que se quedaba boquiabierto: algo que, recordó irritado, al darle rápidamente la espalda, parecía su particular privilegio. Subió las escaleras de la casa y llamó al timbre con la penetrante sensación de que el amigo de Kate lo miraba siempre desde posiciones casi insolentemente ventajosas. Olvidó, por el momento, la ocasión en que, en Venecia, en el palacio, el joven escogido había asistido a la partida del rechazado, pues lord Mark no parecía más rechazado ahora de lo que se lo había parecido en su asiento del café. Densher pensó que él daba la impresión de ser un vagabundo mientras que el otro estaba cómodamente instalado. A pesar de la diferencia de la situación, le pareció mejor instalado que nunca; pensaba en él sobre todo como el amigo de la persona con quien su reconocimiento lo había asociado un minuto antes. El hombre estaba sentado justo en el sitio donde había esperado encontrar a Kate, al lado de la señora Lowder, y ésa era identidad suficiente. Entretanto, en cualquier caso, la puerta de la casa se había abierto y la señora Lowder se plantó ante él. Al menos no era Kate. Era ella en toda su opulencia; y tuvo la presencia de ánimo suficiente para decidir que lord Mark, en el cupé, no tenía importancia y para impedir, con unas palabras firmes dichas por encima del hombro, que el mayordomo de *sir* Luke se quedara a oír lo que hablaba con el caballero que había llamado a la puerta.

—Yo informaré al señor Densher; ¡no es necesario que espere!

Y la conversación, expeditiva y detallada, se desarrolló en las escaleras.

—*Sir* Luke llegará, directo desde Venecia, mañana temprano. No he podido resistirme sin venir a preguntar.

—Ni yo —dijo Densher sin más—. Iba —añadió— camino de Lancaster Gate.

—Qué amable por su parte. —Lo miró con ojos apagados, y él notó que su rostro estaba en armonía con su mirada. Eso, y lo que acababa de decir, le sirvió para comprenderlo todo, y trató de asimilarlo mientras reparaba en el ambiente portentoso, de una compasión casi funcional, que se había convertido en el medio de la señora Lowder para comunicarse con él y que ahora había adquirido un nuevo brillo—. Entonces ¿ha recibido usted su mensaje?

Densher sabía tan bien a qué se refería —igual que lo que había recibido y lo que no— que, con una levísima vacilación, repitió:

—Sí… mi mensaje.

—Nuestra querida paloma, como la llama Kate, ha plegado sus maravillosas alas.

—Sí… las ha plegado.

Estaba destrozado, pero intentó tomárselo como quería la señora Lowder, y vio que interpretaba su asentimiento formal como una muestra de dominio de sí mismo.

—A no ser que sea más exacto decir —añadió en consecuencia ella— que las ha extendido aún más.

Densher se limitó a asentir sólo formalmente, aunque sus palabras encajaban con una figura en lo más profundo de su imaginación.

—Sí, las ha extendido aún más.

—¡Confío en que para volar a una felicidad mayor…!

—Exacto. Mayor —la interrumpió Densher; aunque con una mirada que temió que pudiera distanciarla un poco.

—Sin duda tenía usted derecho —prosiguió ella con mayor reserva— a tener noticias directas. Nosotros lo supimos anoche: de lo contrario, no sé si no habría ido a verle. Pero ¿dice que iba usted a mi casa? —preguntó.

Para entonces Densher había tenido un minuto para reflexionar, y la ventanilla del cupé seguía cerca. Su sofisticado «mi casa» le alcanzó en el aire tibio y húmedo como un golpe en el pecho. ¿«Ganársela»? ¿A la tía Maud? ¡Tanto se la habían ganado que lo dejó perversamente sin aliento! Su mirada, desde donde

estaban, abarcaba la abertura por la que la persona sentada en el carruaje podía haberse asomado, y vio que su interlocutora, por su parte, entendía la pregunta, que además formuló verbalmente: «¿Estará usted sola?». Era una forma casi hipócrita de adaptarse a la imagen que ella tenía ahora de él. Sonó como si quisiera ir a verla para desahogarse en su presencia, pero era justo lo contrario. La necesidad de desahogarse se había secado de pronto en él —desde la noche anterior— y jamás había tenido la sensación de ser tan reservado.

Entretanto, ella había respondido ampliamente:

—Totalmente sola. De lo contrario no se me habría ocurrido; ¡lo lamento, mi querido amigo, demasiado! —Como sus labios no acertaban a decir lo que sentía, se acercó a él con la mano abierta y un instante después estrechó la suya para expresarle sus condolencias—. ¡Mi querido amigo, mi querido amigo! —estaba profundamente «con» él, y aún quería estarlo más: y eso la llevó a añadir—: ¿No prefería, ya que esta Navidad ha de ser tan triste para nosotros, cenar conmigo *tête-à-tête?*

Eso le permitiría aplazar, con gran alivio por su parte, varias horas la conversación con ella, pero también lo dejó bastante perplejo. Aunque no por eso bajó la guardia.

—¿Le importa si no le contesto enseguida?

—Ni lo más mínimo… Dejémoslo pendiente: será lo que usted prefiera, y ni siquiera hace falta que me avise. Sepa sólo que hoy, precisamente, si no viene usted, cenaré sola.

Entonces él pudo al menos preguntar:

—¿Sin la señorita Croy?

—Sin la señorita Croy. La señorita Croy —dijo la señora Lowder— va a pasar la Navidad en el seno de su familia más próxima.

Densher temió, nada más responder, lo que pudiera traicionar su rostro.

—¿Es que la ha dejado a usted?

A su vez, el rostro de la tía Maud recibió la pregunta con un gesto en el que a él le pareció ver un reflejo de los acontecimientos. Entonces estuvo seguro, como no lo había estado nunca, de que, desde que conocía a las dos mujeres, no había habido entre ellas ninguna tensión confesada, ni comentada, ni ninguna crisis desagradable: lo cual era precisamente una prueba de la habilidad con que Kate había sabido gobernar su nave. La situación expuesta por la expresión de la señora Lowder iluminó por contraste la suavidad superficial; que después, cuando tuvo ocasión de pensarlo, volvió a demostrarle el arte, el don particular, por parte de la joven, ahora tan definido y ubicado, tan íntimamente familiar para él, de su talento para la vida. La paz, al cabo de uno o dos días —desde que la había visto la última vez— se había roto; diferencias muy profundas, que habían estado ocultas gracias a la diplomacia de Kate, habían aflorado a la superficie por algún choque excepcional; con el que, además, intuyó que la extraña espera de lord Mark a esa hora y en esa época debía estar vagamente relacionada. Al mismo tiempo cayó en que el talento para la vida probablemente habría intervenido también en la ruptura o lo que quiera que hubiese sucedido; la tía Maud había sufrido más —creyó juzgar— una tensión que un choque. En cualquier caso, dicha señora se adelantó a todos esos rápidos pensamientos.

—Se fue ayer por la mañana y no con mi aprobación. No me importa contárselo… con su hermana: la señora Condrip, no sé si la conoce, vive no sé dónde en Chelsea. Mi otra sobrina y sus asuntos, ¡y que tenga que decir esto un día como hoy!, son una preocupación constante; así que Kate, a raíz… ¡en fin, de los acontecimientos…!, ha ido a verla. Debo decir que, en mi opinión, en vista de cuáles eran esos acontecimientos, y dada su situación, no se le había perdido nada allí.

—Pero ¿ella no opinaba como usted?

—No opinaba como yo. Y ¡cuando a Kate se le mete una cosa en la cabeza…!

—¡Oh, ya me lo supongo! —Había llegado a un punto en la escala de hipocresía en la que podía preguntarse qué importancia tendría un poquito más o menos. Además, con las intenciones que tenía, no le quedaba más remedio que informarse. De lo contrario, la maniobra de Kate podía servir sólo para desconcertarlo; y a estas alturas el desconcierto le inspiraba un horror casi supersticioso.

—Espero que no se trate de acontecimientos demasiado calamitosos.

—No… sólo horribles y vulgares.

—¡Ah! —exclamó Merton Densher.

Era evidente que la señora Lowder había descubierto un bálsamo momentáneo en hablar con él.

—Supongo que sabrá que tienen la desgracia de tener un padre horrible y espantoso.

—¡Ah! —repitió Densher.

—Es demasiado indigno para que hablemos de él, pero ha acudido a Marian, y Marian ha gritado pidiendo ayuda.

Densher reflexionó muy concentrado; y su curiosidad superó por un instante a su discreción.

—Ha acudido a ella ¿para pedirle dinero?

—¡Oh, eso siempre, por supuesto! Pero, en esta ocasión, en busca de refugio, de protección, ante sabe Dios qué. Está allí, el muy animal. Y Kate se ha ido con ellos. Ésa —resumió la señora Lowder, bajando las escaleras— será su Navidad.

Había vuelto a detenerse mientras él pensaba una respuesta.

—En tal caso, la suya pese a todo será mejor.

—Al menos más decorosa. —Y volvió a tenderle la mano—. Pero ¿por qué le hablo de nuestros problemas? Venga, si puede.

Él esbozó una leve sonrisa.

—Gracias. Si puedo.

—Y ahora ¿supongo que irá usted a la iglesia?

Lo preguntó, con buena intención, con el aire y el deseo de proponerle, para consolarlo, algo más eficaz que lo que había hecho ella. Él tuvo la sensación de que era el fin de aquellas intensas expresiones que, según creyó, a ella le habían parecido felices.

—Pues sí, creo que iré.

Después, como la puerta del cupé, al verla acercarse, se abrió desde el interior, él pudo darse la vuelta. Oyó cerrarse la puerta con fuerza a su espalda y al vehículo alejarse en dirección contraria a la suya.

En realidad no iba en ninguna dirección; pese a lo cual, al cabo de diez minutos fue consciente de haber ido hacia el sur. Nada más lógico, admitió después, porque, ya al final de su conversación con la tía Maud, había sabido adónde debía dirigirse. No le quedaba otra posibilidad que ir con Kate, y nada estaba tan claro como la influencia del paso que ella había dado sobre la emoción que le dominaba. Sus dificultades, que, al igual que todo lo demás, parecían espantosas, ¿qué eran, una y mil veces, sino las suyas? Su obligación era asegurarse de que no pasara ni una hora más sin que ocupasen su lugar en su vida. De hecho, habría seguido su camino si no hubiera reparado de pronto en que acababa de mentirle a la señora Lowder —un término que le aliviaba utilizar más de lo necesario—. ¿A qué iglesia podría haber ido en semejante estado de nervios…? Volvió a detenerse, como había hecho al ver el carruaje de la señora Lowder, para preguntárselo. Y, sin embargo, en su interior se agitaba extrañamente el deseo de no faltar a su palabra. Por una feliz casualidad se hallaba en Brompton Road, y con una súbita revelación cayó en que el oratorio[53] quedaba cerca. No tenía más que volver sobre sus pasos y llegaría enseguida. En la puerta de la iglesia, unos minutos después, su idea resultó ciertamente —o eso le pareció— una bendición: entró a un servicio espléndido —la abigarrada multitud así lo testimoniaba— que brillaba y resonaba, desde lejanas profundidades, con el resplandor de las luces del altar y los crescendos del órgano y el coro. No acababa de armonizar con sus sentimientos de ese día, pero era mucho menos discordante que otras cosas posibles y reales. El oratorio, en suma, podía servir para tranquilizarle.

IV

El crepúsculo —que empezó a espesar muy pronto— había caído ya cuando llamó a la puerta de la señora Condrip. Había ido de la iglesia a su club, pues no quería presentarse en Chelsea a la hora de comer y además recordó que debía intentar procurarse una comida por sus propios medios. Lo consiguió sólo en parte: se desplomó en un sillón en el enorme y oscuro vacío de la biblioteca del club, donde no había ni un alma y, al cabo de un rato, cerró los ojos y recuperó una hora del sueño que había perdido esa noche. Antes escribió —fue lo primero que hizo— una breve nota, que, en la desolación navideña del lugar, le costó mucho entregar a un mensajero. Quiso que la llevara en mano, y tuvo que confiar ciegamente en que lo hubiera hecho, pues el mensajero, por alguna razón, no regresó con el recibo de entrega. Cuando, a las cuatro en punto, se encontró cara a cara con Kate en el saloncito de la señora Condrip, descubrió con alivio que había recibido la nota. Lo esperaba y, en cierta medida, estaba preparada para su visita; y eso simplificó un poco las cosas, suponiendo que, en esas circunstancias, un poco tuviera importancia. Su situación fue vagamente intensa para él desde el momento en que llegó, en parte por ser diferente, una diferencia pronunciada y sugestiva respecto la situación en que la había visto siempre. No la había visto más que en sitios comparativamente grandes: en la pomposa casa de su tía, al pie de los altos árboles de Kensington y bajo los altos techos de Venecia. La había visto en Venecia, en una gran ocasión, convertida en el centro mismo de la espléndida piazza: la había visto allí, en otra ocasión aún más memorable, en su propia y modesta habitación, que no desentonaba con ella, pues, a pesar de su modestia, era antigua y elegante; pero el interior de la casa de la señora Condrip, aun considerándolo con indulgencia y pese a que no era del todo mísero, le parecía un entorno casi grotescamente inadecuado para ella. Pálida, seria y encantadora, enseguida le pareció una extranjera distinguida —una extranjera en ese callejón de Chelsea— que se esforzaba por adaptarse a un extraño episodio de su vida y a un lugar de exilio. Lo más extraordinario fue que al cabo de tres minutos él se sintió mucho menos fuera de lugar que ella.

Parte de esta extrañeza —sólo llegaría a percibirlo de manera fragmentaria— emanaba del aire incongruente impuesto en la minúscula salita por la escala y el tamaño de los muebles. Los objetos, los adornos, eran claramente, para las dos hermanas, reliquias y supervivientes de lo que habrían llamado, al menos la señora Condrip, tiempos mejores. Las cortinas que cubrían las ventanas, los sofás y las mesas que entorpecían el paso, los adornos de la chimenea que llegaban al techo y la recargada araña que casi rozaba el suelo, eran recuerdos de hogares anteriores y vínculos con su desdichada madre. Cualquiera que fuese en sí misma la cualidad de esos elementos, Densher notó que el efecto que producían al bloquear torpemente el declinar del día gris era tan feo que resultaba casi siniestro. No transigían ni se adaptaban: imponían su diferencia sin tacto y sin gusto. Al verla en relación con ellos se apreciaba verdaderamente la calidad de Kate. Pero la sensación no era nueva para Densher, y tampoco tenía necesidad, de momento, de que se la recordaran. Sabía tan solo, por una de esas jugarretas que le gastaba constantemente su imaginación, que verla sometida a tanta tensión le inspiraba una profunda lástima, que no era el estado de ánimo que le había impulsado a salir de casa esa mañana; aunque también sabía que él no se lo habría tomado tan a la tremenda. Él podría vivir en un sitio así; a los que están hechos, por así decirlo, de su misma pasta no les ha sido concedido sentirse en el exilio en ningún sitio. Su relativa tosquedad les permitía arreglárselas donde fuese. No era ni mucho menos improbable que su hogar natural, inevitable, definitivo, acabase siendo tan raro e imposible como el que le rodeaba, aunque sin duda estaría menos abarrotado. Al tiempo que comprendía que Kate no habría sido la criatura que era si los objetos que los rodeaban no desentonaran tanto con ella, si no creasen un ambiente que produjese compunción en el espectador, eso se convirtió en el fundamento de su relación con sus familiares, lo cual lo llenó a la vez de seguridad y de incertidumbre. Si él, después de un breve vistazo, la había notado ajena e inconscientemente irónica, ¿qué no percibirían ellos y sobre todo qué le parecerían ellos a ella?

Densher pudo preguntárselo incluso después de que Kate encendiera las largas velas de la repisa de la chimenea. Eran la única iluminación aparte del fuego, y procedió a encenderlas con una callada mordacidad que no obstante dejaba sitio, visiblemente, a su alusión, a pesar de todas las dificultades, y a falta de algo mejor, a la alegría de la Navidad. Tratándose de alegría, dadas las circunstancias, tendrían que contentarse estrictamente con eso. En su nota se había limitado a decirle que tenía que verla cuanto antes y que esperaba que fuese posible, pero nada más verla comprendió que esa precipitación había despertado su interés.

—Esta mañana no pude preguntarle a la señora Lowder, en los pocos minutos que pasé con ella, si te lo había dicho, aunque me pareció entender que sí; y lo he dado por supuesto. En ese momento me sorprendió mucho que, tal como me contó, te hubieses venido aquí de pronto.

—Sí, fue muy repentino. —Muy sencilla y elegante a la luz escasa de la chimenea, con las manos sobre el regazo, Kate consideró lo que él acababa de contarle. Nada más verla le había hablado de lo sucedido a la puerta de la casa de *sir* Luke Strett.

—No me ha dicho nada. Pero lo mismo da… si te refieres a eso.

—En parte sí —respondió Densher, pero lo que dijo a continuación, después de una pausa en la que ella se limitó a esperar, no pareció terminar la frase—. Recibió el telegrama de la señora Stringham anoche. Pero a mí la pobre señora no me ha telegrafiado. El hecho —añadió— debió de producirse ayer, y *sir* Luke, que, por lo visto, se puso en camino enseguida y va a volver directamente, llegará mañana por la mañana. Así que, según creo, la señora Stringham se ha quedado para enfrentarse sola a la situación. Por supuesto —concluyó—, *sir* Luke no podía quedarse.

El modo en que ella lo miró tal vez dejase traslucir su impresión de que Densher estaba intentando ganar tiempo.

—¿Tu telegrama lo envió *sir* Luke?

—No… Yo no he recibido ningún telegrama.

Ella pareció sorprendida.

—Pero ¿ni una carta…?

—No de la señora Stringham… no. —No se extendió más, a pesar de la ocasión que ella le brindó cuando se abstuvo de hacerle más preguntas.

¿Por quién se había enterado entonces? Tal vez, después de todo, al verla, sí hubiese querido ganar tiempo; y, como para demostrarle que respetaba ese impulso, Kate le preguntó por algo distinto.

—¿Te gustaría ir con ella… con la señora Stringham?

Al menos en eso sí fue claro.

—Ni muchísimo menos. Está sola, pero es muy capaz y muy valiente. ¡Además…! —Iba a continuar, pero se interrumpió.

—Además —dijo ella—, ¿está Eugenio? Claro, por supuesto, me acuerdo de Eugenio.

Pronunció las palabras tratando de que no sonasen ásperas y enseguida él se mostró totalmente de acuerdo.

—Claro que sí, y con razón. Será una ayuda inapreciable… Es capaz de cualquier cosa. Lo que iba a decir —prosiguió— es que su gente llegará pronto desde Estados Unidos.

Resultó que de eso Kate podía informarle enseguida.

—El señor no sé cuántos, la persona que está a cargo de los asuntos de Milly… su fideicomisario, supongo, fue a Venecia después de recibir la última carta de la señora Stringham.

—¡Ah!, eso debió ser después de la última vez que tu tía habló conmigo… de la última vez antes de esta mañana. Me alivia saberlo. Saber —dijo— que ellos se encargarán.

—¡Oh, claro que se encargarán! —Y sonó como si ninguno de los dos estuviese pensando verdaderamente en eso. No obstante, Kate se aproximó un poco más a sus preocupaciones—. Pero, si nadie te telegrafió, ¿por qué fuiste esta mañana a casa de *sir* Luke?

—¡Oh!, por otra cosa… que ahora te diré. Es por lo que quería verte con tanta urgencia y de lo que he venido a hablarte. Pero necesito unos minutos. Me ha dejado un poco confuso —añadió— verte en este sitio. —Se levantó mientras hablaba; ella siguió sin moverse. Densher fue hacia la chimenea, se inclinó un poco de espaldas al fuego para mirarla y se limitó a preguntar lo que le interesaba—: ¿Es muy grave lo que te ha traído aquí?

No obstante, para entonces ya había dicho suficiente para justificar el deseo de Kate de saber más; así que, pasando por alto sus palabras, ella insistió en lo que quería saber.

—¿Insinúas, si es que puedo preguntarlo, que ella, moribunda…? —Su rostro perplejo le interrogó más que sus palabras.

—Pues claro que puedes preguntarlo —dijo él al cabo de un momento—. Como te he dicho, he venido a hablarte de lo que he recibido. No me importa que sepas —prosiguió— que lo he meditado mucho esta noche y esta mañana antes de llegar a una decisión. Pero aquí estoy. —Y esbozó una sonrisa que él mismo notó que a Kate debió resultarle mecánica.

Ella pareció querer demostrarle que era más sincera con él que él con ella.

—¿No querías venir?

—Habría sido muy sencillo, cariño —y siguió sonriendo—, si hubiese sido sólo cuestión de «querer». Admito que la idea de lo que era mejor hacer adoptó toda suerte de formas difíciles y portentosas. La verdad es que lo que he recibido… no me ha hecho muy feliz.

Por lo visto, eso la extrañó y lo miró a la luz de lo que acababa de decir.

—Pareces disgustado… Desde luego has estado torturado. No estás bien.

—¡Oh… estoy bastante bien!

Pero ella continuó, sin hacerle caso:

—Detestas lo que estás haciendo.

—Simplificas demasiado, mi niña… —se había puesto muy serio—. No es ni mucho menos tan sencillo.

Ella pareció pensar de qué podía tratarse entonces.

—Por supuesto, sin más detalles, no puedo saber de qué se trata. —No obstante, siguió calmada y paciente—. Una no sabe a qué atenerse si, en un momento así, pudo escribirte. No se entiende ni con la voluntad más fuerte del mundo. —Y luego, como Densher hizo una pausa que parecía simbolizar todas las explicaciones que, para su desgracia, todavía tenía que dar, añadió—: Aún no has decidido qué hacer.

Lo dijo con mucha amabilidad, casi con dulzura, y él no lo negó enseguida. Aunque lo hizo después de mirarla.

—Oh, sí… lo he decidido. ¡Lo que pasa es que al verte aquí, con todo lo que esto parece suponer para ti…! —Y sus ojos, como apremiados por esos presagios, recorrieron el saloncito.

—Es un sitio horrible, ¿verdad? —dijo Kate.

Eso le devolvió a lo que él quería averiguar:

—¿Te ha traído aquí algo muy grave?

—¡Oh!, tardaría tanto en explicártelo como tú en contarme lo que me tengas que contar. No te preocupes —continuó— por «verme aquí», ni por lo que parezca «suponer» para mí, pues ni yo misma lo sé. Y ten en cuenta que, al fin y al cabo, si tienes dificultades, puedo querer ayudarte. Tal vez incluso pueda hacerlo.

—Mi niña, ese deseo es precisamente la causa de mis dificultades. —Lo dijo con una sencillez tan extraña y repentina que ella sólo acertó a mirarle; él se dio cuenta e intentó ser menos impreciso—: Sin embargo, no debería ser así.

Lo cual sonó aún más ambiguo.

Ella esperó un momento.

—¿Se trata, como dices de mis propias dificultades, de algo grave?

—Bueno —respondió lentamente—, tú me dirás si te lo parece. Digo si mi idea te parece…

Hablaba tan despacio que Kate terminó la frase por él.

—«¿Grave?» —dejó traslucir por fin un deje de impaciencia, en forma de risa—. No puede parecerme nada hasta que sepa de qué estás hablando.

Estas palabras hicieron que volviese sobre el asunto, aunque al principio sólo acertó a dar vueltas, con las manos en los bolsillos, sobre la estera de la chimenea. Bastó con ese ir y venir para que renaciera en él otro momento: la ocasión oscura y tormentosa en que Susan Shepherd estuvo sentada en su habitación, igual que ahora Kate, y él había dudado, tan penosamente como en esta ocasión, lo que podía y no podía decir. Sin embargo, esta vez era en cierto modo más fácil. Intentó, en cualquier caso, conservar ese recuerdo cuando se detuvo delante de su compañera.

—El mensaje del que hablo, no puede ser, por la fecha, de estos últimos días. El matasellos es legible y así parece indicarlo; pero ¡resulta inconcebible que escribiera…! —Se interrumpió, mirándola como si ella pudiera entenderle.

No era difícil de entender.

—¿En su lecho de muerte? —Kate reflexionó un instante—. ¿No estábamos de acuerdo en que no ha habido nadie como ella en el mundo?

—Sí. —Y, mirando por encima de su cabeza, habló con mucha claridad—. No ha habido nadie como ella en el mundo.

Kate, desde su silla, sin moverse, alzó los ojos hacia donde él estaba mirando sin darse cuenta. Luego,

cuando él volvió a mirarla, añadió una pregunta:

—Y ¿no dependerá un poco de en qué consista el mensaje?

—Un poco tal vez… pero no mucho. Es un mensaje —dijo Densher.

—¿Estás hablando de una carta?

—Sí, una carta. Dirigida a mí de su puño y letra… sin ninguna duda.

Kate reflexionó un instante.

—¿Conoces bien su letra?

—¡Oh!, perfectamente.

El tono en que lo dijo pareció determinar —con una leve extrañeza— su siguiente pregunta.

—¿Has recibido muchas cartas de ella?

—No. Sólo tres notas. —Habló mirándola a la cara—. Y muy, muy cortas.

—¡Ah! —dijo Kate—, el número da igual. Tres líneas deben haber bastado si tan seguro estás de recordarla.

—Lo estoy. Además —continuó Densher—, vi su letra otras veces. De hecho, creo recordar que, antes de que se fuese a Venecia, me mostraste una de sus notas precisamente para eso. Y, en otra ocasión, ella me copió no sé qué.

—¡Oh! —exclamó Kate casi con una sonrisa—, no te pregunto por los detalles de tus motivos. Con uno bueno es suficiente. —A lo cual, no obstante, añadió como si no quisiera demostrar impaciencia o la más mínima ironía—. Y ¿la letra era igual que siempre?

Densher respondió como para mejorar esa descripción.

—Es preciosa.

—Sí… era preciosa. En fin —observó Kate para coincidir aún más con él—, para nosotros no es nuevo que era extraordinaria. Todo es posible.

—Sí, todo es posible —pareció aferrarse extrañamente a esas palabras—. No paro de repetírmelo. Es lo que siempre he creído —explicó un tanto vagamente— que sentías.

Kate esperó a que dijese algo más, pero él le dio la espalda con las manos en los bolsillos: esta vez se dirigió a la única ventana de la salita, cuya persiana no habían cerrado puesto que no había lámpara. Vio la niebla iluminada por las farolas y se abstrajo contemplando el sórdido callejón londinense, que le pareció sórdido comparado con el recuerdo de esa otra ocasión en que se había abstraído, mientras la señora Stringham lo miraba, contemplando la vista de Gran Canal. Tuvo muy presente que la última vez que se había visto arrastrado a esa actitud lo que le había empujado había sido lo mucho que se había resistido a la oportunidad de abandonar a Kate. Su acompañante había esperado pacientemente a que dijese que lo haría, y él había meditado sobre lo vano de semejante esperanza. La atención de Kate, entretanto, se concentró sobre la espalda y los hombros que él le mostraba de forma tan familiar, como si tratara de identificar en su expresión una referencia a cosas no dichas, vínculos necesarios que echaría de menos por mucho que se esforzara en prescindir de ellos. El efecto de esa tensión fue que volvió a preguntarle.

—¿Recibiste anoche eso de lo que hablas?

Él se volvió.

—Al regresar de Fleet Street, una hora antes de lo normal, lo encontré con otras cartas sobre mi mesa. Lo extraordinario es que fue lo primero que vi desde la puerta. Lo reconocí, supe lo que era, sin necesidad de tocarlo.

—Lo entiendo. —Kate le escuchaba respetuosa, pero él tono en que había hablado le pareció tan singular que enseguida añadió—: Lo dices como si en todo este tiempo no lo hubieses tocado.

—Oh, sí, lo he tocado. Tengo la sensación de no haber tocado otra cosa desde entonces. Lo así con la mayor firmeza —prosiguió para ser lo más claro posible.

—Entonces ¿dónde está?

—¡Oh!, lo traigo aquí conmigo.

—Y ¿lo has traído para enseñármelo?

—Lo he traído para enseñártelo. —Lo dijo con una claridad que tuvo, entre sus otras peculiaridades, casi una nota de alegría, pero no hizo ni un solo movimiento para acompañar sus palabras. Ella sólo pudo volver a mirarlo con gesto expectante, mientras él, ante su impaciencia, parecía pensar perversamente en otra cosa —. Pero ahora que la has visto se te han quitado las ganas…

—No deseo otra cosa —dijo—. Lo que pasa es que no me dices nada.

Ella le sonrió, por fin, como si fuese un niño caprichoso.

—Me da la impresión de que te digo tanto como tú a mí. Ni siquiera me has aclarado por qué las explicaciones que necesitas no emanan de ese documento que tienes. —Luego, al ver que no respondía, lo

comprendió en un instante—. ¿Es que no lo has leído?

—No lo he leído.

Ella lo miró admirada.

—Entonces ¿cómo quieres que te ayude?

Sin que Kate se inmutara, volvió a alejarse cinco pasos y luego regresó a su lado.

—Diciéndome esto. Algo que no quisiste decirme el otro día.

Ella respondió con vaguedad.

—¿El otro día?

—El primero después de mi regreso… el domingo que fui a veros. ¿Qué hace él —prosiguió Densher— a esas horas de la mañana con ella? ¿Qué significado tiene que haya estado con ella?

—¿De quién estás hablando?

—De ese hombre… de lord Mark, por supuesto. ¿Qué significa?

—¡Ah! ¿Con la tía Maud?

—Sí, cariño… y contigo. Viene a ser más o menos lo mismo; y es lo que no me dijiste el otro día cuando te lo pregunté.

Kate intentó recordar ese día.

—No me preguntaste nada sobre ninguna hora.

—Te pregunté cuándo había sido la última vez que lo habías visto… antes, digo, de su segundo viaje a Venecia. No respondiste y, como estábamos hablando de un asunto relativamente más importante, opté por dejarlo correr. Pero el caso, cariño, es que todavía no me has respondido.

Kate pareció entender dos cosas de su discurso con más claridad que las demás.

—¿«No respondí» y «optaste por dejarlo correr»? —Se limitó a mirarle con gesto inexpresivo—. Hablas como si estuviese ocultando algo.

—Ya ves —insistió Densher— que sigues sin contestarme. Lo único que quiero saber —explicó pese a todo— es si hubo alguna relación entre su manera de proceder, que fue en la práctica, ¡de eso estoy seguro!, el golpe que precipitó lo que ha ocurrido ahora, y algo que sucedió antes entre él y tú. ¿Cómo demonios se enteró de que estábamos comprometidos?

V

Kate se incorporó muy despacio; era la primera vez que se movía desde que se sentó después de encender las velas.

—¿Estás tratando de insinuar que debo habérselo dicho yo?

Habló no tanto con resentimiento como con desánimo y él se apresuró a demostrar que lo había notado.

—Mi niña, no estoy tratando de «insinuar» nada; pero estoy muy atormentado y no lo entiendo. Además, ¿qué tiene que ver ese animal con nosotros?

—Desde luego —coincidió ella.

Kate movió la cabeza como si hubiera encontrado, un minuto después, una leve disculpa para su sinrazón. Su gesto tenía —y sólo por ese motivo— esa dulzura no del todo coherente que a menudo le había servido para imponer sus condiciones respecto a alguna diferencia. Era, en la práctica, lo mismo que estaba haciendo ahora y, en esencia, él lo sabía y lo aceptaba, pese a todo, como algo inevitable. Kate se quedó a su lado, con una paciencia que daba a entender que había imaginado, cuando lo oyó hablar en tono suplicante, que se disponía a besarla. No fue así, aunque sus súplicas no se acallaron por eso.

—¿Qué hacía, desde las diez de la mañana del día de Navidad, con la señora Lowder?

Kate pareció sorprenderse.

—¿No te contó ella que vive allí?

—¿En Lancaster Gate? —La sorpresa de Densher igualó la suya—. ¿Que vive allí…? ¿Desde cuándo?

—Desde anteayer. Llegó antes de que me fuese. —Después procedió a explicárselo, tras admitir que era un tanto anómalo—. Es una casualidad… como que la tía Maud se haya quedado a pasar la Navidad en Londres, pero no tiene nada de monstruoso. Nos quedamos y, ahora que me he venido, ella lo lamenta, porque, con las noticias que nos traías a diario, a ninguna de las dos nos apetecía ver a más gente.

—¿Os quedasteis por… Venecia?

—Pues claro. ¿Por qué si no? E incluso un poco —añadió sin inmutarse Kate—, al menos en el caso de la tía Maud, por ti.

Él lo agradeció.

—Entiendo. Fue muy generoso por vuestra parte. Pero ¿por quién —preguntó— se ha quedado lord Mark?

—Su presencia en Londres, me parece, obedece a motivos muy prosaicos. Tiene un apartamento y se le ha presentado la ocasión de alquilarlo ventajosamente… tanto que, a pesar de todas sus reticencias, y dada su confesada, su decidida, falta de dinero, no ha podido negarse.

Había captado por completo la atención de Densher.

—¿A pesar de todas sus reticencias? ¿Qué reticencias son ésas?

—No sé. Digamos, que no se supone que deba hacer esas cosas.

—¿Ganar dinero?

—Ganarlo con pequeñas economías. No obstante, por lo visto, ha tenido que hacer de la necesidad virtud. Debía dejar su casa a los pocos días para cedérsela al inquilino; y la tía Maud, que conoce muy bien sus asuntos, dijo: «Véngase a Lancaster Gate, aunque sea sólo a dormir, hasta que, como todo el mundo, se vaya usted al campo». Se disponía a partir, creo que a Matcham, ayer por la tarde: es decir, según lo que me dijo la tía Maud.

Mientras hablaba, Kate le había parecido a su compañero maravillosa, tranquilizadora, persuasiva.

—¿Quieres decir que te lo contó para que no tuvieses que irte de la casa?

—Sí: se le había metido en la cabeza que el motivo de que me fuese era en buena parte su presencia allí.

—Y ¿lo era?

—Un poco, tal vez. Pero, tal como me imaginaba, aquí tengo muchas más razones. Así que —dijo con

sinceridad— no tiene mayor importancia. Me alegro de estar aquí: aunque ¡no pueda hacer gran cosa! —No obstante dio a entender que eso tampoco le importaba—. Por lo que dices, no se fue a Matcham; aunque es posible que, si puede, se marche esta tarde. Pero lo que me parece más probable, y en realidad tengo que reconocer que ha sido muy amable, es que no haya querido dejar a la tía Maud sola, como he hecho yo, el día de Navidad. Y, si ha renunciado a ir a Matcham por ella, es un *procédé* que por fuerza tiene que haberla complacido. No me extraña, por tanto, que ella insista, en un día triste, en llevarlo con ella. No pretendo conocer —concluyó— sus manejos; pero no creo que haya nada más.

—Siempre crees que hay algo más, y siempre lo has creído —replicó Densher—, y, al menos cuando estoy contigo, siempre doy por sentado que es cierto.

Ella lo miró como si extrajera conscientemente y hasta con mucho cuidado el aguijón de sus reservas; luego habló con una gravedad tranquila que pareció demostrar lo mucho que le habían gustado sus palabras.

—Gracias.

Esto causó efecto, como siempre. Seguían muy cerca, cara a cara, y, cediendo al impulso al que se había resistido unos instantes antes, él le puso las manos sobre los hombros, la sujetó con fuerza un minuto y la zarandeó un poco, no sin ternura, como para expresar algo más confuso y difícil de lo que podía decir con palabras. Luego, inclinó la cabeza y posó los labios sobre su mejilla. Después se apartó un instante y volvió a sus idas y venidas, mientras ella seguía en la postura en la que, pasiva y como una estatua, había recibido su muestra de cariño. No obstante, eso no le impidió ofrecerle, como si lo que le había dado le bastara por el momento, su indulgencia. Relacionó con calma y lucidez ciertos hechos y volvió a sentarse.

—Estoy intentando situar exactamente en el tiempo algo que me ocurrió mientras estabas en Venecia. Me refiero a una conversación que tuve con él. Me habló… Se desahogó conmigo.

—¡Ah, ahí lo tienes! —exclamó Densher, que se había dado la vuelta.

—Bueno, si «tenerlo», como lo llamas con tanta elegancia, es negarme a recibirle como él quería, y a pesar de su insistencia, me confieso culpable. ¿Habrías preferido —prosiguió— que le diese una respuesta que no le hubiese empujado a partir?

Él reflexionó un poco confuso.

—¿Sabías que iba a ir?

—Ni por un instante; pero me temo que, aunque eso no encaje con tus extrañas suposiciones, le habría dado exactamente la misma respuesta de haberlo sabido. Si no te lo conté a tu regreso es sólo porque no es algo cuyo recuerdo me haga especialmente feliz. Espero haberte tranquilizado —continuó—, y que no sea exigir demasiado si te pido que lo olvides.

—Claro —dijo Densher en tono afectuoso—, lo olvidaré. —Pero un instante después añadió—: Vio algo. Lo adivinó.

—Si lo que quieres decir —respondió ella— es que, por desgracia, fue el único a quien no pudimos engañar, no te llevaré la contraria.

—No… claro que no. Pero ¿por qué —se aventuró a preguntar Densher— fue por desgracia el único…? En el fondo no es inteligente.

—Lo bastante, al parecer, para haber percibido un misterio, un enigma, en algo tan poco natural, si se piensa bien, como mi actitud. Así que ahondó en su convencimiento y obró en consecuencia.

Densher pareció considerar un momento el convencimiento de lord Mark como si fuese una mancha en el rostro de la naturaleza.

—¿Porque le habías dado la impresión de que podía tener esperanzas?

—Por supuesto yo había sido amable con él. De lo contrario ¿qué habría sido de nosotros?

—¿Qué?

—De ti y de mí. De todos modos, la impresión que yo pudiera darle no tiene importancia. Lo importante era la que le diese a la tía Maud. Además, no olvides que él siempre ha tenido esa impresión de ti. No puedes evitarlo —dijo—, pero, al fin y al cabo, eres… tú.

—Todo lo que quieras. Pero, cuando fui a Venecia y me quedé… ¿qué —preguntó Densher— conclusión sacó él?

—Que fueses a Venecia y te gustase, que no tiene nada de raro para nadie, él se lo explicó de otro modo. Y además se las arregló para ver en ello cierto disimulo.

—¿A pesar de la señora Lowder?

—No —respondió Kate—, a pesar de la señora Lowder no. La tía Maud, antes de eso que llamas su segundo viaje a Venecia, no le había convencido… y sobre todo que yo le rechazara no ayudó. Pero volvió convencido. —Y, al ver que su compañero parecía no entender nada, añadió—: Digo después de haber visto

a Milly, de haber hablado con ella y de haberse marchado de Venecia. Milly lo convenció.

—¿Milly? —repitió Densher en tono más bien vago.

—De que eras sincero. De que era a ella a quien querías. —Densher se apartó y se plantó otra vez delante de la ventana—. A su regreso, la tía Maud —continuó entretanto Kate— se enteró por él. Y por eso ahora se lleva tan bien contigo.

Él se limitó a mirar en silencio por la ventana un minuto, luego se apartó.

—Y contigo.

El efecto de esta afirmación tan brusca tenía casi una nota de reproche; o la habría tenido si no hubiese sonado tan sincera. Era brusca porque era cierta, pero su verdad parecía imponerse como un argumento tan concluyente que impidiera toda respuesta. Eso determinó la gravedad de todo mientras se miraban en silencio. Fue como si una palabra equivocada pudiese desencadenar algún peligro. Densher actuó por fin en consecuencia: delante de ella sacó una cartera del bolsillo del chaleco y una carta doblada que atrajo la mirada de ambos. Volvió a meter el receptáculo en su sitio y, con un movimiento no menos raro por ser visiblemente instintivo e inconsciente, se llevó a la espalda la mano que sostenía la carta. Por fin habló de otra cosa distinta.

—Deduzco, por lo que me dijo la señora Lowder, que tu padre está aquí.

Si a ella nunca le había costado mucho esfuerzo interrumpir sus digresiones, no iba a costarle ahora.

—Sí, lo está. Pero no hay que temer que nos interrumpa —lo dijo como si lo hubiese pensado antes—. Está en la cama.

—¿Es que está enfermo?

Ella movió tristemente la cabeza.

—Mi padre nunca está enfermo. Es una maravilla. Sólo que… no tiene fin.

Densher se paró a reflexionar.

—¿Puedo ayudarte de algún modo con él?

—Sí —respondió ella fatigada y casi con serenidad—. Haciendo que tanto él como Marian noten lo menos posible tu visita.

—Entiendo. Detestan que me hayas recibido. Pero no podía dejar de venir, ¿no crees?

—No, no podías dejar de venir.

—Pero, por otro lado, conviene que me vaya cuanto antes…

Kate casi se molestó.

—¡Ah!, no pongas palabras desagradables en mi boca un día como hoy. Ya tengo bastantes preocupaciones.

—¡Lo sé… lo sé! —exclamó en tono implorante—. Es sólo que estoy preocupado por ti. ¿Cuándo llegó?

—Hace tres días… después de pasar más de un año sin verla, después de haber olvidado aparentemente su existencia sin lamentarlo lo más mínimo; y en un estado en el que era imposible no acogerle.

Densher dudó.

—¿Quieres decir tan necesitado…?

—No, no de comida, ni de las cosas más necesarias… ni siquiera, a juzgar por su apariencia, de dinero. Parecía tan maravilloso como siempre. Pero estaba… en fin, aterrorizado.

—Aterrorizado ¿de qué?

—No lo sé. De alguien… de algo. Dice que quiere estar tranquilo. Pero su tranquilidad es espantosa.

Él vio su sufrimiento, pero no se resistió a preguntar:

—¿Qué hace?

Kate dudó.

—Llora.

Una vez más, él volvió a contenerse, pero luego se arriesgó a preguntar.

—¿Qué es lo que ha hecho?

Ella se levantó despacio y volvieron a estar frente a frente. Le aguantó la mirada y palideció más que nunca.

—Si me quieres… en fin… no me preguntes por mi padre.

Él esperó una vez más.

—Te quiero. Si he venido es porque te quiero. Y si te he traído esto es porque te quiero.

Y le tendió la carta que seguía en su mano.

Sin embargo ella sólo la aceptó con la mirada.

—Pero ¡si no has roto el sello!

—Si lo hubiese roto… sabría exactamente lo que dice. La he traído para que lo rompas tú.

Ella siguió muy seria y sin tocar la carta.

—¿Para que rompa el sello de algo que ella te envía a ti?

—Precisamente porque lo envía ella. Aceptaré tu opinión sea la que sea.

—No lo entiendo —dijo Kate—. ¿Qué opinas tú? —Y, como no le respondió, añadió—: Me parece que lo sabes. Tu instinto te lo dice. No necesitas leerla. Es la prueba.

Densher afrontó sus palabras como si fuesen una acusación, una acusación para la que estuviese preparado y que sólo hubiese una manera de afrontar.

—Desde luego, sospecho de qué se trata. Se me ocurrió mientras lo pensaba anoche. Gracias a lo intempestivo de la hora. —Sostuvo la carta y pareció insistir más que confesar—. La carta se envió para que llegase en un momento concreto.

—¿El día de Nochebuena?

—El día de Nochebuena.

Kate esbozó de pronto una extraña sonrisa.

—¡La época de los regalos! —Y, en vista de que él no decía nada, prosiguió—: ¿Quieres decir que la escribió, mientras aún podía, y la guardó para que llegase ese día?

Se limitó a mirarla mientras pensaba y no respondió.

—¿Qué quieres decir con «la prueba»?

—Pues la prueba de la belleza con que te ha amado. Pero no —dijo— voy a romper el sello.

—¿Te niegas tajantemente?

—Tajantemente. Jamás. —Luego añadió en un tono extraño—. Lo sé sin tener que romperlo.

Él hizo otra pausa.

—Y ¿qué es lo que sabes?

—Que te anuncia que te ha hecho rico.

Esta vez la pausa fue más larga.

—¿Me ha dejado su fortuna?

—Toda no, desde luego, porque es inmensa. Pero sí una gran cantidad de dinero. No me hace falta —continuó Kate— saber cuánto. —Y volvió a esbozar esa sonrisa tan extraña—. Confío en ella.

—¿Te lo dijo? —preguntó Densher.

—¡Nunca! —Kate se ruborizó visiblemente al pensarlo—. Eso no habría sido, por mi parte, jugar limpio. Y siempre jugué limpio con ella —añadió.

Densher, que la había creído —no podía evitarlo—, continuaba con la carta en la mano. Estaba mucho más tranquilo, como si su tormento hubiese cesado.

—Jugaste limpio conmigo, Kate; y por eso, ya que hablamos de pruebas, quiero darte una. He querido que vieses, antes incluso que yo mismo, algo que me parece sagrado.

Ella frunció un poco el ceño.

—No entiendo.

—Me he exigido a mí mismo un tributo, un sacrificio con el que pueda reconocer especialmente…

—Con el que puedas reconocer ¿qué? —preguntó cuando él se interrumpió.

—La admirable naturaleza de tu propio sacrificio. En Venecia actuaste con una generosidad apabullante.

—Y ¿el privilegio que me ofreces con ese documento es mi recompensa?

Él hizo un gesto.

—Es lo único que puedo hacer como símbolo de mi actitud.

Ella le observó un buen rato.

—Tu actitud, cariño, demuestra que tienes miedo de ti mismo. Has tenido que obligarte, forzarte.

—Entonces ¿vas a aceptar?

Ella contempló fijamente la carta aunque sin tocarla.

—¿De verdad lo quieres?

—De verdad lo quiero.

—Y ¿que haga con ella lo que me plazca?

—Todo menos revelar su contenido. Debe quedar, perdona que te lo pida, entre tú y yo.

Ella dudó una última vez, pero por fin se decidió.

—Confía en mí. —Tomó entre sus manos el escrito sagrado y lo sostuvo mientras sus ojos volvían a fijarse en los bellos caracteres de Milly de los que habían hablado antes—. Tenerla en la mano —dijo— es suficiente para saberlo.

—¡Oh, lo sé! —exclamó Merton Densher.

—Bueno, ¡pues si los dos lo sabemos…! —Se volvió hacia el fuego, al que se había acercado, y con un

rápido gesto la echó a las llamas. Él hizo un leve gesto, como para impedirlo, pero se detuvo con la misma rapidez con que había actuado ella. Se limitó a contemplar, a su lado, cómo ardía el papel; y luego sus ojos volvieron a encontrarse—. Lo recibirás todo —dijo Kate— desde Nueva York.

VI

De hecho, después de que, dos meses más tarde, recibiera noticias de Nueva York ella fue a verle una mañana a su apartamento, no como en Venecia, en respuesta a su extremada insistencia, sino por una necesidad reconocida en primer lugar por ella misma, aunque también a resultas de una misiva que le entregaron, consistente en una nota de Densher acompañada de una carta, «para entregar sólo en mano» dirigida a él por un eminente bufete norteamericano, un bufete cuya reputación, según había tenido ocasión de comprobar cuando estuvo en Nueva York, estaba en boca de todos, y cuyo director, el principal ejecutor del extenso testamento de Milly, identificaron en Lancaster Gate como el caballero que acudió con tanta premura en auxilio de la señora Stringham poco antes de la muerte de la joven. El acto de Densher al recibir el documento en cuestión —un acto cuyas consecuencias había tenido tiempo de meditar— constituyó estrictamente, por raro que parezca, la primera alusión a Milly, o a lo que podría o no haber hecho Milly, que hizo nuestra pareja desde que contemplaron juntos la destrucción en la vulgar chimenea de Chelsea de la misteriosa carta de su puño y letra. En aquella ocasión se habían despedido enseguida, por deferencia, en esta ocasión por parte de él, a la alusión que hizo Kate a su responsabilidad por ir a verle, y cuando volvieron a verse el asunto sólo estuvo presente —al menos hasta que se produjese algún destello de luz nueva— por la intensidad con la que expresaba calladamente su ausencia. Además, en esas semanas no se vieron muy a menudo, a pesar de que en enero y parte de febrero les resultó relativamente fácil. La estancia de Kate en casa de la señora Condrip se prolongó gracias a un subsidio de su tía, que habría sido un misterio para Densher si dicha señora no le hubiese hecho partícipe, en Lancaster Gate, y muy a su pesar, de la esotérica opinión que tenía de tal medida.

—Ha sido idea suya —le dijo, como si de verdad despreciara las ideas, cosa que no hacía—; y yo he puesto en práctica la mía, que consiste en dejarla hacer hasta que se harte. Ya se ha hartado, se hartó enseguida; pero es más orgullosa que un demonio y no volverá hasta que encuentre algún motivo que pueda alegar y que no tenga nada que ver con su hartazgo. Dice que son sus vacaciones y que las está pasando a su manera: las vacaciones a las que, una vez al año, como ella dice, tienen derecho hasta las fregonas en las cocinas. Así que actuamos de acuerdo con ese principio. Pero no creo que vuelva a tomarse otras vacaciones parecidas pronto. Además, es bastante considerada, viene a verme a menudo: siempre que la llamo; y, en conjunto, estos dos años se ha portado muy bien, así que, para ser justa con ella, no me quejo. La pobre ha estado siempre a la altura de las circunstancias; aunque a un hombre inteligente como usted —concluyó la tía Maud— no hace falta que le diga a qué me refiero.

En parte para evitar eso, las apariciones de Densher bajo el techo de la buena señora, después de Navidad, se fueron espaciando. La fase de su situación que, a su regreso de Venecia, las había hecho casi frecuentes por un breve período, se había oscurecido bastante, y con ella el impulso que había obrado entonces. Había ocupado su lugar otra fase, que le habría sido penosamente difícil definir o establecer, pero cuya creciente influencia había hecho que la señora Lowder dejase de interesarle. Hubo un momento en que pareció posible que la señora Stringham, al regresar acompañada a Estados Unidos, hiciera escala en Londres y se alojara en casa de su antigua amiga; en cuyo caso habría estado dispuesto a visitarla con frecuencia. Pero el peligro pasó —lo había percibido como un peligro— y la persona del mundo a quien más habría deseado ver a solas se embarcó hacia el oeste en Génova. Así que sólo le escribió, una vez roto, después de la muerte de Milly, el profundo silencio que, antes de dicho acontecimiento, habían acordado ambos. Ella le respondió dos veces desde Venecia y aún encontró tiempo para responderle otras dos desde Nueva York. La última de las cuatro cartas llegó a la vez que el documento que envió a Kate, pero no consideró la posibilidad de enviársela también. Su correspondencia con la amiga de Milly era ya para él un rasgo —un factor, habría dicho en su periódico— del tiempo, largo o corto, que le quedara; pero uno de sus pensamientos más penetrantes era que no se lo había contado a Kate. Ella no le había preguntado, no le

había dicho nunca: «¿No has vuelto a tener noticias de…?», así que no se había visto obligado a sacar a relucir la cuestión. Se decía que era una suerte, porque le gustaba su secreto. Consideraba un secreto su correspondencia transatlántica, y admitía que era en lo único en lo que no era sincero. De hecho, tenía para ello una vívida imagen mental: lo veía como una pequeña roca que emergiera en la grandísima extensión de las aguas, la insondable extensión gris de su sinceridad. El hecho de que, en ocasiones recientes, hubiese dado con Kate algún que otro paseo solitario, cada vez más caracterizados por lo que callaban que por lo que se decían, no servía para mitigar su extraña sensación de vulnerabilidad. Había algo muy profundo en su interior que no había mostrado a nadie: en particular no le había dejado ver más que lo imprescindible a su compañera de aquellos paseos; pero no por eso le angustiaba menos la sombra del nefasto temor de que pudiera llegar a saberse. Tenía la sensación de haber invocado lo que tanto le inquietaba con una estúpida buena fe; y lo más raro era que en aquella roca emergente, aferrándose a ella y a Susan Shepherd, se sintiera a resguardo de miradas ajenas. Sin duda, eso representaba su fe en la capacidad de dicha señora o en su delicada disposición a protegerle. En cualquier caso, sólo Kate sabía lo que sabía y era la última persona interesada en contarlo; a pesar de lo cual era como si su acto, tan profundamente ligado a ella, y que en ningún modo deseaba evocar o recordar, flotara de aquí para allá llevado por el viento. Su honradez, tal como la veía si pensaba en Kate, constituía el elemento esencial de dicha amenaza: hasta el punto de que a veces consideraba, como último impulso o último remedio, la necesidad de enterrar cada uno en la oscura ceguera de los brazos del otro el conocimiento compartido que los dos sabían que no podían deshacer.

De no haber sido porque en esos días lo de los abrazos estaba muy limitado, ése podría haber sido el expediente al que hubiesen recurrido. Fue significativo, en unas condiciones en las que todo contaba, que tres veces, en Battersea Park —donde la señora Lowder había dejado de ir a pasear— hubiese adoptado el medio habitual, en caminos apartados, de sujetarla con fuerza a su lado. En la presente situación, ella podía ausentarse de casa sin tener que dar demasiadas explicaciones… que era justo lo que les daba por primera vez un margen apreciable. Él suponía —aunque no insistía demasiado— que siempre podía decir en Chelsea que había atravesado la ciudad, por amabilidad, para ir a visitar a su tía; mientras que en Lancaster Gate, por una u otra razón, nunca había podido poner como excusa que iba a visitar a sus parientes. Gozaban, pues, de una libertad de una pureza que no habían saboreado hasta entonces y que ambos demostraban apreciar de diversas maneras. Lo demostraban de hecho de todas las maneras posibles excepto haciendo un gran uso de ella: una incoherencia que también procuraban demostrarse que era normal. Él le daba a entender a su compañera que el favor del que disfrutaba ahora en Lancaster Gate, la calidez con que lo recibían, les segaba en cierto modo la hierba bajo los pies. Confiaban demasiado en él… habían triunfado demasiado. No podía, en suma, citarse con ella sin engañar a la tía Maud, y ella por su parte no podía ir a ver a dicha señora sin atarlo a él de pies y manos. Kate lo entendía igual que él la entendía a ella cuando admitía que a su vez gozaba del favor de la tía Maud, aunque de manera no tan embarazosa. En ese momento su situación era peculiar: se estaba portando generosamente con ella y abusar de su confianza despertaba sus escrúpulos. La señora Lowder había encontrado por fin —de manera inconsciente— la forma de desconcertarles. De todos modos, se veían de vez en cuando, al sur de la ciudad, para sacar a beneficio de ambos la moraleja de su derrota. Cruzaban el río; deambulaban por los barrios sórdidos y seguros; el invierno era suave, por lo que, sentados en lo alto del tranvía, podían ir juntos a Clapham o a Greenwich. Aunque nunca habían dispuesto de tanto tiempo, Densher tenía la sensación de que, por una ley singular, su tono —apenas sabía cómo llamarlo— nunca había sido tan insulso. No hablar de lo que habrían podido hablar los llevaba a otro terreno; era como si recurrieran a una perversa insistencia para inventarse lo que ignoraban. Ocultaban su búsqueda de lo irrelevante con sus modales exquisitos; se cuidaban de afectar una cortesía que antes habían dejado que aflorase por sí sola; a menudo, después de despedirse de ella, él se paraba en seco, y luego se alejaba con el regusto de lo mucho que habían cambiado. Podría haber descrito dicho cambio —si hubiese osado describirlo— por lo condenadamente educados que se habían vuelto. Dada la familiaridad y la intimidad que habían alcanzado, casi resultaba gracioso. ¿Qué peligro corrían de ser maleducados después de haber sido tan tiernos el uno con el otro? Éstas eran las cosas que se preguntaba cuando dudaba de qué era lo que más temía.

Sin embargo, al mismo tiempo la tensión tenía su encanto: en eso consistía el interés de una criatura que podía llevarlo a uno de vuelta con ella por caminos muy variados. Era una vez más su talento para la vida; que encontraba en ella una diferencia para un tiempo distinto. No renunciaba a su tradición; sólo se limitaba a hacer algo nuevo con ella. Además, francamente, nunca había sido más agradable, ni en cierto sentido —por decirlo de manera prosaica— mejor compañía: se sintió casi como si la estuviera conociendo sobre esa base definida, que incluso dudaba de si considerar reducida o extendida; en cualquier caso como si estuviese admirándola igual probablemente que la admiraría la gente a quien conocía «por ahí». No había

contado, en suma, con que todavía tuviese algo nuevo para él; y, sin embargo, así fue: en lo alto de un tranvía al pasar junto al mercado del Borough se sintió como si estuviese sentado a su lado en la cena. ¡Qué persona habría sido si hubiesen sido ricos, qué genio para eso que se llama la gran vida, qué presencia para eso que se llama una gran mansión, qué elegancia para eso que se llama una posición elevada! Podía lamentar que no fuesen príncipes ni millonarios. Ella lo había tratado en Navidad con una suavidad que le había parecido tener entonces la cualidad del terciopelo pensado para formar gruesos pliegues, pero extendido un poco más fino; de momento, no obstante, le dio la impresión de un contacto tan multitudinario como sólo puede serlo lo superficial. En todo ese tiempo no le había dicho una palabra de lo que ocurría en la casa. Salía y volvía allí, pero lo más parecido a una alusión era la mirada con que se despedía de él. Una mirada como una prohibición repetida: «Es lo que tengo que ver y saber… así que no lo toques. Sólo despertarías un mal antiguo, que consigo dominar, a mi manera, sentándome a su lado. Me voy —¡déjame!— a sentarme otra vez junto a él. La manera de tenerme lástima —si eso es lo que quieres— es creer en mí. Si de verdad pudiésemos hacer algo sería muy diferente».

Observaba mientras se marchaba lo que cargaba con cierta rigidez. Era confuso y oscuro, pero ¡cómo la obligaba a dominarse y erguir la cabeza! Él mismo podría en esos momentos haber estado balanceándose un poco como uno de los objetos de su cesta. Sin duda, gracias a esas impresiones notó el paso de las semanas antes del día en que Kate subió sus escaleras con una agilidad casi sorprendente. Constituyeron para él la contradicción de que, mientras en general se supone que los períodos de espera hacen que el tiempo transcurra más despacio, en realidad fue la espera lo que pareció pasar deprisa. El secreto de esa anomalía, para ser claros, era que sabía que, a medida que deshacían los días, algo raro desaparecía con ellos. Era sólo un pensamiento, pero tan nuevo y delicado que sometía a cualquier cosa preciosa a la avidez del tiempo. Era sólo suyo y su íntima amiga era la última persona con quien podría haberlo compartido. Lo reprimía como una punzada que le resultara familiar; lo dejaba atrás, por así decirlo, cuando salía, pero volvía a casa cuanto antes porque sabía que lo encontraría allí. Luego lo sacaba de su rincón sagrado y lo despojaba de sus suaves envolturas; las iba quitando una a una, las manipulaba, como un padre, confuso y tierno, podría manejar a un niño tullido. Pero lo tenía delante, temeroso de que pudiera verlo alguien. En esas horas, en otras palabras, se decía que nunca sabría lo que decía la carta de Milly. Probablemente conocería pronto la intención anunciada en ella; pero eso, para las profundidades de su espíritu, era lo de menos. Lo que no sabría nunca sería la forma que Milly le había dado a su acto. Esta forma tenía posibilidades que, en cierto sentido, al pensar en ellas, su imaginación había completado y refinado. Las había convertido en una revelación, cuya pérdida era como una perla de valor incalculable que hubiesen arrojado a un mar profundo ante sus ojos y que él hubiese prometido no recuperar, o más bien como el sacrificio de algo vivo y palpitante, algo que, para el oído espiritual, podía haber sido audible como un llanto callado y lejano. Eso era lo que oía y lo que disfrutaba cuando se hallaba solo en el silencio de su apartamento. Fomentaba y cuidaba dicho silencio hasta que, una vez más, los inevitables ruidos de la vida, ásperos y desagradables en comparación, lo acallaban y apagaban: sin duda, mediante el mismo proceso con que sanaban oficiosamente el dolor de su alma que, en cierto sentido, se fundía con él. El hecho de que no pudiera quejarse acrecentaba aquel silencio sagrado. Le había devuelto su libertad a la pobre Kate.

Lo crucial y evidente, en cuanto se presentó allí el día que hemos dicho, era que se hallaba en plena posesión de la misma. Eso habría señalado en el acto una diferencia —aunque no lo hubiese hecho ninguna otra cosa— entre las condiciones actuales y las anteriores, el carácter de su último encuentro en Venecia. Aquello había sido idea de él, mientras que este paso lo había dado ella; los escasos rasgos que tenían en común quedaron en evidencia, de manera casi patética, para su visión consciente, desde el primer momento. Estaba tan seria como la vez anterior; miró a su alrededor para ocultarlo, igual que había hecho entonces; fingió, también como entonces, en un ambiente en el que sus palabras sonaron vacías, demostrar interés por la casa y curiosidad por sus «cosas»; hubo cierta reminiscencia en el modo en que, cuando ella no se colocó bien el velo, él le dijo que sería mejor que se lo quitara, y ella accedió a su sugerencia delante del espejo. Todas esas cosas eran vanas; y lo único real fue que, a los pocos minutos, comprendió que ella introducía literalmente el elemento tranquilizador que antes había corrido por cuenta de él. Era ella quien tenía una total presencia de ánimo. De hecho, enseguida la utilizó.

—Como ves, en esta ocasión no he dudado en romper tu sello.

Nada más entrar había dejado sobre la mesa el largo sobre, muy abultado, que él le había enviado dentro de otro aún mayor. No obstante, Densher no lo miró: convencido de que no quería volver a hacerlo; además había quedado con el lado de la dirección hacia arriba. Así que no «vio» nada, la observación de Kate atrajo tan sólo su mirada hacia sus ojos y declinó acercarse siquiera al objeto en cuestión.

—No es «mi» sello, cariño; y mi intención, que intenté expresar en mi nota, era que lo considerases tuyo

y no mío.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso de que es mío?

—Bueno, digamos, si lo prefieres, que es de ellos: de esas buenas personas de Nueva York, los autores de la comunicación. Si el sello está roto ya no tiene remedio; pero podríamos —añadió acto seguido— haber devuelto la carta intacta e inviolada. Acompañada solo —dijo con una sonrisa y el corazón en la mano— de una nota muy amable.

Kate pestañeó igual que un paciente indica con estoicismo a la mano del médico que ha tocado un lugar doloroso mientras le explora. Él comprendió enseguida que estaba preparada, y junto a este indicio de que era demasiado inteligente para no estarlo, llegaron varias posibilidades. Era —para decirlo con sencillez— lo bastante inteligente para cualquier cosa.

—¿Es eso lo que propones?

—¡Ah!, es demasiado tarde… al menos de forma ideal. Ahora, ¡con ese indicio de que sabemos…!

—Pero tú no lo sabes —respondió ella con gentileza.

—Digo —prosiguió él sin hacerle caso— lo que habría sido más elegante. Devolverla con una expresión de agradecimiento sin saber lo que decía, y que la prueba de ello hubiese sido el estado del sobre… eso sí que me habría complacido.

Ella reflexionó un instante.

—¿Para que el estado del sobre demostrara que el rechazo no se basaba en la insuficiencia de la suma? ¿Es eso lo que dices?

Densher volvió a sonreír como divertido por su caprichoso sentido del humor.

—Bueno, sí… algo parecido.

—Por lo que si alguien lo sabe, aunque ese alguien sea sólo yo, ¿ya no resulta tan elegante?

—Es diferente porque te confieso que tenía la esperanza de que me lo devolvieses tal cual lo habías recibido.

—No expresaste esa esperanza en tu carta.

—No quise. Preferí dejarlo en tus manos. Quería… oh, sí, ya que quieres saberlo, ver lo que harías.

—¿Querías comprobar hasta dónde podía llegar mi falta de delicadeza?

Él siguió imperturbable; le embargaba una especie de calma debida a la presencia en el ambiente de algo que no habría sabido identificar.

—En fin, quería ponerte a prueba… en una ocasión tan buena.

A Kate se le notaba en la cara que estaba sorprendida.

—La ocasión es buena —dijo mirándolo—. Dudo que la haya habido mejor.

—Pues ¡cuanto mejor sea la ocasión, mejor será la prueba!

—¿Cómo sabes —preguntó en respuesta a sus palabras— de lo que soy capaz?

—¡No lo sé, cariño! Pero, si no hubieses roto el sello, lo habría sabido antes.

—Entiendo —respondió ella—. Pero entonces no lo habría sabido yo. Y tú tampoco habrías sabido lo que sé.

—Permite que te diga antes de nada —replicó él— que, si pretendes corregir mi ignorancia, insisto en que no lo hagas.

Ella dudó.

—¿Es que temes el efecto de esa corrección? ¿Sólo puedes hacerlo a ciegas?

Él esperó un momento.

—¿Qué crees que quiero hacer?

—Pues lo único que puedo deducir que estás pensando. No aceptar… lo que ella ha hecho. ¿No hay una expresión para estos casos? Rechazar una herencia.

—Olvidas una cosa —dijo él al cabo de un momento—. Que te he pedido que la rechaces también tú.

Su sorpresa suavizó sus rasgos, aunque no por eso dejó de hacer gala de la misma firmeza.

—¿Cómo voy a rechazar algo que nada tiene que ver conmigo?

—¿Cómo? Con una sola palabra.

—Y ¿qué palabra es ésa?

—Tu consentimiento a mi rechazo.

—Mi consentimiento no significa nada si no puedo impedirlo.

—Puedes impedirlo perfectamente. Tenlo muy presente.

Ella pareció enfrentarse a una amenaza.

—¿Insinúas que no lo rechazarás si no te doy mi consentimiento?

—Sí. No haré nada.

—Que yo sepa, eso equivale a aceptarla.

Densher hizo una pausa.

—No haré nada oficial.

—Supongo que quieres decir que no cobrarás el dinero.

—No lo cobraré.

Aunque era de esperar, sus palabras sonaron muy serias.

—En ese caso, ¿quién lo cobrará?

—Cualquiera que quiera o pueda.

Una vez más, Kate guardó silencio un instante: no quería decir nada que no quisiera. Sin embargo, cuando habló, él había ganado terreno.

—¿Cómo puedo cobrarlo si no es a través de ti?

—No puedes. Igual —añadió él— que yo no puedo renunciar a él sino a través de ti.

—Oh, ¡qué va! No tengo nada.

—Me tienes a mí —dijo Merton Densher.

—¿En qué sentido?

—En el sentido que ves… y que siempre te he dejado ver. ¿Cuándo te he dado a entender otra cosa? —preguntó con una impaciencia súbita y fría—. Sin duda debes sentir, hasta el punto de que ni siquiera tienes necesidad de salvarme, que estoy en tus manos.

—¡Cariño, qué amable por tu parte —dijo ella con una risa nerviosa— dármelo a entender!

—¡No te doy a entender nada! Ni siquiera te sugerí la posibilidad que, como te he dicho hace un instante, tenías de devolver la carta. Tu libertad es por tanto absoluta.

Habían llegado a un punto en el que los dos estaban pálidos y en el que todo lo que no se habían dicho asomaba a sus ojos con un vago terror ante el conflicto que se avecinaba. Algo incluso se alzó entre los dos en uno de sus breves silencios: una especie de mutua súplica de que no fuesen demasiado sinceros. En cierto modo sabían lo que necesitaban, pero ¿quién lo diría primero?

—¡Gracias! —dijo Kate a propósito de sus palabras sobre su libertad, aunque de momento no hizo nada. Fue una suerte que hubiesen renunciado a cualquier ironía, y saberlo contribuyó a despejar un poco el ambiente.

La consecuencia fue que poco después él prosiguió:

—Debes sentir intensamente que se trata de aquello por lo que tanto nos hemos esforzado.

No obstante, ella actuó como si su observación no tuviese mayor interés: su atención estaba ocupada en otra cosa.

—¿De verdad, tratándose de algo tan importante, no tienes ninguna curiosidad por saber lo que ha hecho por ti?

—¿Quieres que te lo jure solemnemente?

—No… pero no lo entiendo. ¡Creo que yo en tu lugar…!

—¡Ah! —él no pudo contenerse—, ¿qué sabes tú de mi lugar? Perdona —añadió enseguida—, pero ya te he dicho lo que prefiero.

No obstante, a ella se le ocurrió una idea curiosa.

—Pero ¿no se publicará la noticia?

—¿La noticia?

—Digo que te enterarás de todo por el periódico.

—¡Jamás! Ya encontraré el modo de evitarlo.

Eso pareció zanjar la cuestión, pero al minuto ella volvió a insistir.

—¿Pretendes huir de todo?

—De todo.

—Y ¿no necesitas tener una idea más clara sobre lo que me pides que te ayude a rechazar?

—No me hace falta tener una idea más clara. Doy por sentado que la suma no es pequeña.

—¡Ah, ya lo ves! —exclamó ella.

—Si quiso dejarme un recuerdo —prosiguió él con calma— es lógico que no sea escasa.

Kate esperó como si no supiera cómo formularlo.

—Es digna de ella. Igual que era ella… si recuerdas lo que dijimos.

Él dudó… como si hubiesen dicho muchas cosas. Pero recordó una de ellas.

—¿Extraordinaria?

—Extraordinaria. —Una leve, levísima, sonrisa se asomó al rostro de Kate, pero se desvaneció al ver que la amenaza de las lágrimas, un poco menos incierta, se asomaba al de él. Se le inundaron los ojos… pero

eso la animó a continuar con dulzura—: Creo que lo que de verdad temes es lo que pueda ser. Quiero decir —explicó— que temes conocer toda la verdad. Si estás enamorado sin saberlo, ¿qué ocurrirá cuando lo sepas? Y te asusta, ¡es maravilloso!, quererla.

—Nunca he estado enamorado de ella —dijo Densher.

Ella aceptó lo que decía, pero al cabo de un instante respondió:

—Ahora lo creo… mientras estaba viva. Al menos mientras estuviste allí. El cambio se produjo, como es lógico, el día que la viste por última vez; ella murió por ti, para que pudieras entenderla. Y a partir de ese momento la entendiste. —Kate se puso en pie despacio al decir esas palabras—. Igual que yo la entiendo ahora. Lo hizo por nosotros. —Densher se levantó y se puso delante de ella, mientras Kate continuaba exponiendo su idea—. Yo decía, estúpida de mí, a falta de un nombre mejor, que era una paloma. Pues bien, extendió sus alas, y llegaron a eso. Nos cubren.

—Nos cubren —dijo Densher.

—Eso es lo que te doy —concluyó muy seria Kate—. Eso es lo que he hecho por ti.

El modo en que él la miró tenía una lenta extrañeza que había secado, por el momento, sus lágrimas.

—¿He de entender entonces…?

—¿Que consiento? —ella movió la cabeza—. No… porque lo entiendo. Te casarás conmigo sin el dinero; con él no te casarás. Si no consiento, tú tampoco.

—¿Me perderás? —lo dijo con franqueza, aunque intimidado por su perspicacia—. Pues no perderás nada más: será todo tuyo, hasta el último penique.

Su claridad no podía ser más indicativa, pero esta vez Kate no estaba sobrada de sonrisas.

—Precisamente… para que tenga que elegir.

—Tienes que elegir.

Mientras esperaba con intensidad y el aliento más entrecortado que nunca, a él le pareció extraño que estuviese tomando una decisión semejante en su apartamento.

—Sólo hay una cosa que puede salvarte de mi elección.

—¿De la elección de que te lo dé todo a ti?

—Sí… —Movió la cabeza en dirección al largo sobre que seguía sobre la mesa—, de que me des eso de ahí.

—Y ¿de qué se trata?

—De tu palabra de honor de que no estás enamorado de su recuerdo.

—¡Oh… su recuerdo!

—¡Ah! —Kate hizo un gesto elocuente—, no hables como si no pudieras estarlo. En tu lugar yo podría; y tú eres de los que se conformarían con eso. Su recuerdo es tu amor. No necesitas otro.

Él la escuchó en silencio, observando su rostro pero sin moverse. Luego se limitó a decir:

—Me casaré contigo, tenlo presente, dentro de una hora.

—¿Tal como éramos?

—Tal como éramos.

Pero ella se volvió hacia la puerta, negó con la cabeza y en ese momento fue el fin.

—¡Nunca volveremos a ser tal como éramos!

HENRY JAMES (Nueva York en 1843 - Londres 1916). Nació en el seno de una rica y culta familia de origen irlandés. Recibió una educación ecléctica y cosmopolita, que se desarrolló en gran parte en Europa. En 1875, se estableció en Inglaterra, después de publicar en Estados Unidos sus primeros relatos. El conflicto entre la cultura europea y la norteamericana está en el centro de muchas de sus obras, desde sus primera novelas, *Roderick Hudson* (1875) o *El americano*
(1876-77),
hasta *El Eco* (1888) o *La otra casa* (1896) y la trilogía que culmina su carrera: *Las alas de la paloma* (1902), *Los embajadores* (1903) y *La copa dorada* (1904). Maestro de la novela breve, algunos de sus logros más celebrados se cuentan entre este género: *Otra vuelta de tuerca* (1898), *En la jaula* (1898) o *Los periódicos* (1903). Fue asimismo un brillante crítico y teórico, como atestiguan los textos reunidos en *La imaginación literaria*. Nacionalizado británico, murió en Londres en 1916. «No había nada que James hiciera como un inglés, ni tampoco como un norteamericano —ha escrito Gore Vidal—. Él mismo era su gran realidad, un nuevo mundo, una “terra incognita” cuyo mapa tardaría el resto de sus días en trazar para todos nosotros».

Notas

[1] Las partes más íntimas, secretas o sagradas, especialmente de una casa o edificio. [*Esta nota, como las siguientes, es del traductor*]. <<

[2] No se hable más. <<

[3] La calle londinense donde tenían su sede numerosos periódicos de la época. <<

[4] Un enorme carro sobre el que se transporta al ídolo de Krisná en el festival Ragha latra, en Puri, ciudad al este de la India a orillas del golfo de Bengala y bajo cuyas ruedas se arrojaban —según los relatos de los ingleses— los adoradores del dios con el convencimiento de que así alcanzarían la felicidad eterna. <<

[5] Una guía de viajes publicada por la editorial londinense John Murray. <<

[6] Se refiere a los lujosos hoteles suizos de dichas ciudades a orillas de los lagos Como y Maggiore, cerca de la frontera italiana. <<

[7] El *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, un periódico conservador que daba numerosas noticias culturales. <<

[8] El poeta y dramaturgo belga Maurice Maeterlinck
(1862-1949),

el crítico de arte Walter Pater
(1839-1894),
el militar y memorialista Jean Baptiste Antoine Marcelin Marbot
(172-1854)
y el historiador alemán Ferdinand Adolph Gregorovius
(1821-1891).
<<

[9] Alusión a un verso del poema de Tennyson *Locksley Hall* (1842): *Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay*, que podría traducirse: «Mejor cincuenta años en Europa que todo un siglo en Catay». <<

[10] La moda del momento. <<

[11] La editorial alemana Tauchnitz, muy popular entre los viajeros de lengua inglesa, publicaba sin autorización obras de autores ingleses y norteamericanos aprovechando la circunstancia de que no había una ley internacional de derechos de autor. <<

[12] ¡Hasta luego! <<

[13] Semanario ilustrado, radical y satírico sobre la vida inglesa fundado en Londres en 1841. <<

[14] Wigmore Street es el centro de un área de casas aristocráticas, tiendas elegantes y colecciones de arte. <<

[15] Alusión a un verso de *Idylls of the King*
(1859-1885),
de Alfred lord Tennyson. <<

[16] El famoso autor victoriano Thomas Carlyle
(1795-1881),
autor de *Sartor Resartus*, a quien se conocía por el sobrenombre del «sabio de Chelsea». <<

[17] Personajes de obras de Charles Dickens: Pickwick, de *Papeles póstumos del club Pickwick*
(1836-1837);
la señora Nickleby, de *Nicholas Nickleby*
(1838-1839);
la señora Micawber, de *David Copperfield*
(1849-1850).
< <

[18] Momentos hermosos. < <

[19] Volandero, frívolo. < <

[20] Jean-Antonie Watteau
(1684-1721)
pintor francés conocido sobre todo sobre sus cuadros de *fêtes galantes*, festivales a los que asistían damas y caballeros exquisitamente vestidos en parques y jardines. Sus figuras siempre son muy pequeñas con respecto al espacio del lienzo. < <

[21] En la India, la corte de un gobernante; de manera más general, una recepción oficial. < <

[22] Los insoportables o desagradables. < <

[23] Bellos ojos. < <

[24] El pintor manierista Agnolo di Cosimo
(1503-1572),
apodado *Il Bronzino*, conocido por sus elegantes retratos de aristócratas de la época. A diferencia de Matcham, la casa solariega de lord Mark, el cuadro no es imaginario, sino un retrato de Lucrezia Panciatichi, que hoy puede contemplarse en la Galería de los Oficios de Florencia. < <

[25] Más o menos. < <

[26] Los grandes espíritus coinciden. < <

[27] Mateo, 10, 16. < <

[28] Edward Gibbon
(1737-94)
cuyo *Decadencia y caída del Imperio romano*
(1776-1788)
fue uno de los primeros estudios historiográficos que retrataron la desintegración de una civilización elevada; J.
A. Froude
(1818-1894),
autor de *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*
(1856-1870)
y principal discípulo de Carlyle; Claude Henri de Saint-Simon
(1760-1825),
reformista socialista y fundador del positivismo, que sustituyó las verdades de la metafísica por una ética de la sociología y el humanismo. < <

[29] Inesperadas. < <

[30] Homenaje. < <

[31] Las guías Baedeker eran de las más útiles y populares para viajar por Europa. < <

[32] La estación londinense a la que llegan los trenes de Liverpool, el puerto de arribada de los pasajeros transatlánticos. < <

[33] La calle donde está el hotel de Milly, probablemente el
Claridge's.
< <

[34] Esas damas. < <

[35] Grandeza. < <

[36] Negociaciones. < <

[37] El modelo real es el palazzo Barbaro, del siglo XV, en el Gran Canal, donde se hospedó Henry James en 1887 y escribió *Una vida londinense*. < <

[38] Alusión a los «pueblos Potemkin» creados por Catalina la Grande
(1729-1796)
para impresionar a sus visitantes europeos: falsas fachadas de edificios, ante los que esperaban alegres campesinos para vitorear a la emperatriz. < <

[39] Paolo Veronese
(1528-1588),
el gran pintor veneciano, siempre pintaba a sus modelos con vestidos coloridos y suntuosos. < <

[40] Dialecto hablado en la antigua Atenas, que se utiliza para referirse a una lengua pura, sencilla y refinada. < <

[41] En Venecia se denomina *campo* a las plazas (con la excepción de la Piazza San Marco), pero el *campo* por antonomasia es el Campo San Polo. < <

[42] Barrio. < <

[43] Una lancha pública para cruzar el Gran Canal. < <

[44] La expresión *être bon prince* significa dar pruebas de tolerancia y generosidad. < <

[45] Giovanni Bellini (c.
1430-1516),
uno de los maestros de Ticiano, muchos de sus cuadros tratan los misterios cristianos y temas del Nuevo Testamento. <<

[46] Torquato Tasso
(1544-1595),
poeta italiano de la época de la Contrarreforma, autor del poema épico *Jerusalén liberada*. <<

[47] En *Las bodas de Caná*, un cuadro del Veronese, un joven alza una copa de vino. Susan parece recordar el cuadro e identificar su figura con Densher. <<

[48] Calle flanqueada por un canal. <<

[49] El espacio en la Piazza San Marco entre las dos columnas con la estatua de san Teodoro y el León alado de Venecia. En otro tiempo era el lugar donde se celebraban las ejecuciones públicas. <<

[50] El más famoso y antiguo café de Venecia. <<

[51] Con mayor motivo. <<

[52] El asiento con toldo del pasajero en la góndola. <<

[53] El oratorio de Brompton, u oratorio de San Felipe Neri, de estilo italianizante, en el que se celebraban servicios populares. <<